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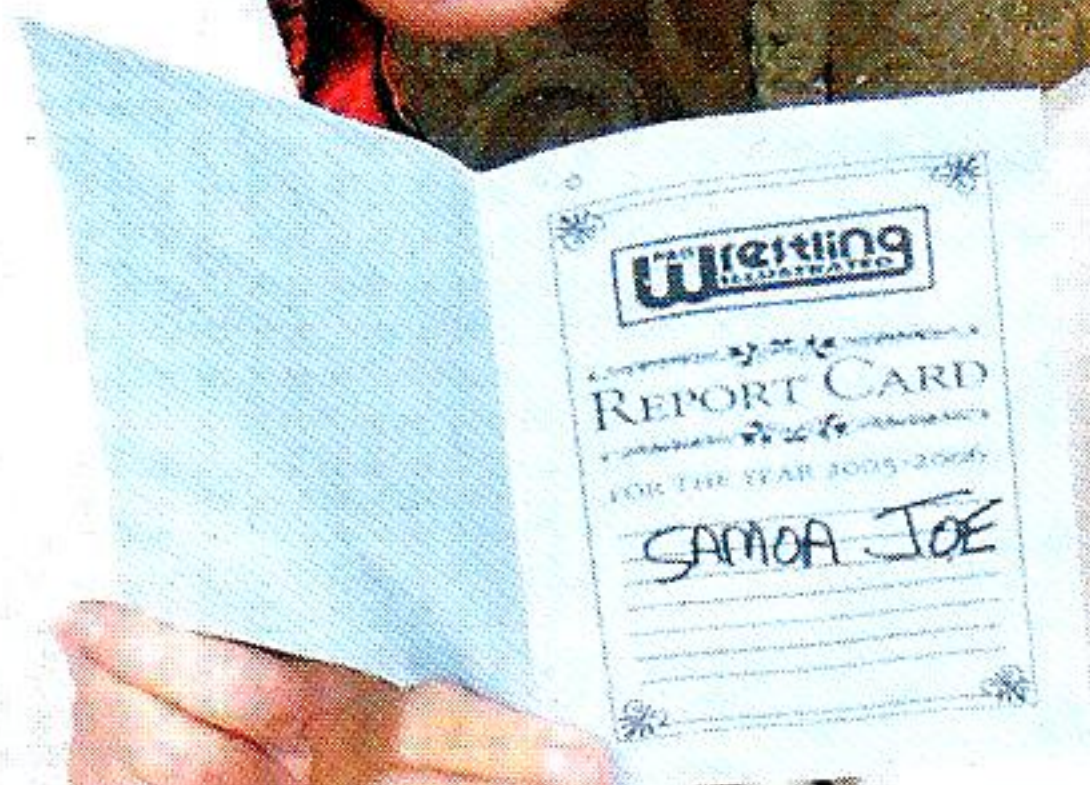
OF THE STARS

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OUR 2006 REPORT CARDS OF THE STARS

Section Compiled by Dan Murphy

NOTHING CREATES ANXIETY quite like receiving a report card. But, much to the dismay of millions of schoolchildren, report cards serve a valuable purpose. They allow us to assess how students are progressing, how they are adapting to change, and whether they are living up to their potential. We have taken that report card evaluation and adapted it to fit the world of professional wrestling. In this exclusive "Report Cards Of The Stars" section, we evaluate 50 of the biggest names in WWE, TNA, and the independents and try to evaluate which wrestlers are meeting their potential and which ones are falling short of their personal standards. Some of the appraisals you are about to read are bound to create controversy. We don't pull any punches or play any favorites—we just grade the wrestlers on what they have accomplished. While some wrestlers probably aren't going to be too happy, at least they know where they need to improve in time for next year's report cards. Each wrestler is graded in the following five categories:

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Did the wrestler achieve what he or she set out to do over the past 12 months? If he was a top contender to a major title at this time last year, did he succeed in winning the title, or did he fall short? Or were the wrestler's personal goals based on something other than title belts? This year, Shelton Benjamin scored an A+ in this category not just because he won two Intercontinental titles, but because he overcame a career-threatening slump and re-invented his image, with a little help from his mama. Triple-H, on the other hand, scored a C in this category. He may be higher on the card than Benjamin and has headlined several pay-per-views, but "The Game's" main goal for this year was to recapture the Raw World title. Triple-H is held to a higher standard because he had loftier goals. Keep in mind that the goals of no two wrestlers were exactly the same.

MARKETABILITY: It doesn't matter how great of a wrestler you are—if you're not marketable, you're probably never going to make it to the top. Marketability can be measured in several ways: What kind of reaction does the wrestler receive from the fans as he makes his way to the ring? How are T-shirt, book, and DVD sales doing? Do more people tune in when this wrestler appears on

TV, or do they flip to another channel? Has he or she landed any mainstream television or film roles or are they just taking up space?

REPERTOIRE: Every wrestler has his or her own unique style. Some are mat technicians; others are high-fliers, power merchants, brawlers, or strikers. Many combine different aspects of those styles, as well as tap into international disciplines and styles and incorporate those into their games. We're not so much grading a wrestler on his personal style as we are looking to see if he has incorporated new maneuvers into his moveset, or how effective that individual's style has been against top competition. If a wrestler has more depth than just four or five signature moves, he scores better in this category than those with less depth.

CAREER GROWTH: This category is closely related to Goal Achievement. Basically, is the wrestler in a better position today than he was a year ago? And is his career currently headed on the right path, or is he in for a rocky road ahead?

OVERALL VALUE: How important is this wrestler to his company or brand? Does he play a vital role, or is he spending most of his time wrestling in filler mid-card matches?

REY MISTERIO JR.

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Rey Misterio winning the Royal Rumble was a stunner in and of itself, but no one could have predicted little Rey could go on and win the Smackdown World title at WrestleMania 22. Misterio is one of the most inspirational stories wrestling has ever seen. He hasn't been what you'd call a dominant champion, suffering non-title losses to Mark Henry, the Great Khali, Rob Van Dam, and Finlay, but just the fact that the 5'3", 163-pound Rey managed to win the Smackdown World title is an incredible accomplishment. **GRADE: A+**

MARKETABILITY: Who would have predicted Lucha Libre would be so hot this year? From the *Mucha Lucha* cartoon to Jack Black's *Nacho Libre*, luchadors seem to be all over the place these days. Rey Misterio is hot. His replica masks, T-shirts, and DVDs are big sellers, especially among younger fans. But Rey also appeals to the huge Hispanic demo-

graphic. He has a broader fan base than anyone else in WWE. **GRADE: A+**

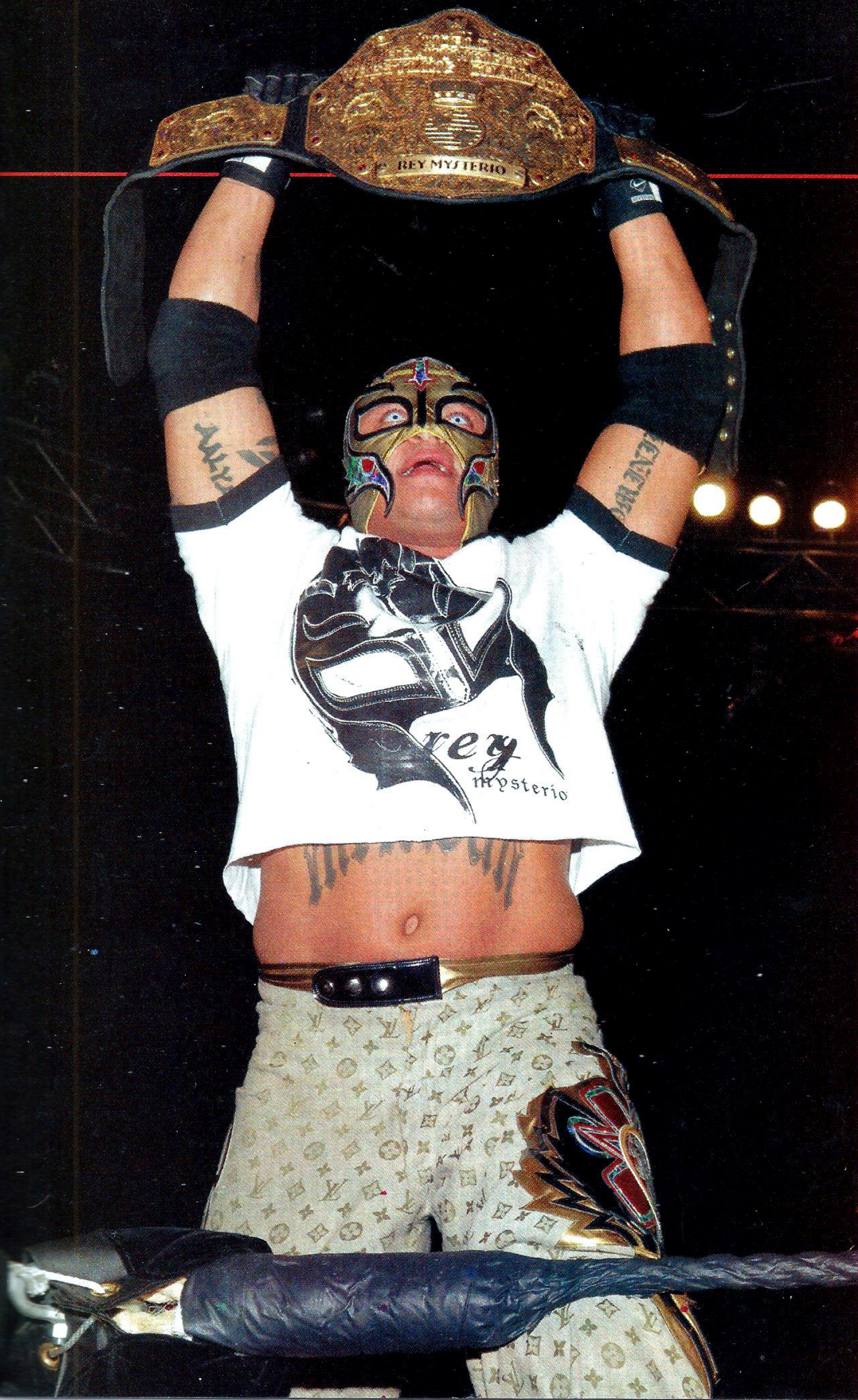
REPERTOIRE: For years, Misterio has been known as the wrestler who popularized cruiserweight wrestling in the U.S. He managed to perfectly blend his Mexican and American influences into his own unique style. There have been many imitators, but 10 years after he first thrilled fans in ECW, there's still only one Rey Misterio Jr. Beyond his 619 and "West Coast Pop," Rey has the unique ability to squirm out of an opponent's grasp and turn a defensive move into an offensive move. How many times have we seen Rey counter a power bomb with a hiragana or slip out of a powerslam, grab the back of an opponent's head and hit a reverse bulldog on his way to the mat? Rey always finds new ways to surprise us. **GRADE: A+**

CAREER GROWTH: Rey has gone from being a novelty act to being the Smackdown World champion. He may like to credit Eddie Guerrero for giving him the strength to succeed, but Rey has always had the heart to defy the odds, break the boundaries, and to win. In 2006, he has broken new ground. He was—and is—a championship-caliber wrestler. **GRADE: A+**

OVERALL VALUE: "Rey-Rey" is coming up with straight A pluses on this report card, and he gets a perfect score here as well. Rey not only appeals to younger fans, but he appeals to wrestling purists just as much. Everyone loves an underdog, and Rey plays the role better than anyone else. He is capable of wrestling five-star matches, consistently sells merchandise, and is one of the most exciting men in the business. Any wrestling company would be thrilled to have him as part of its roster. **GRADE: A+**

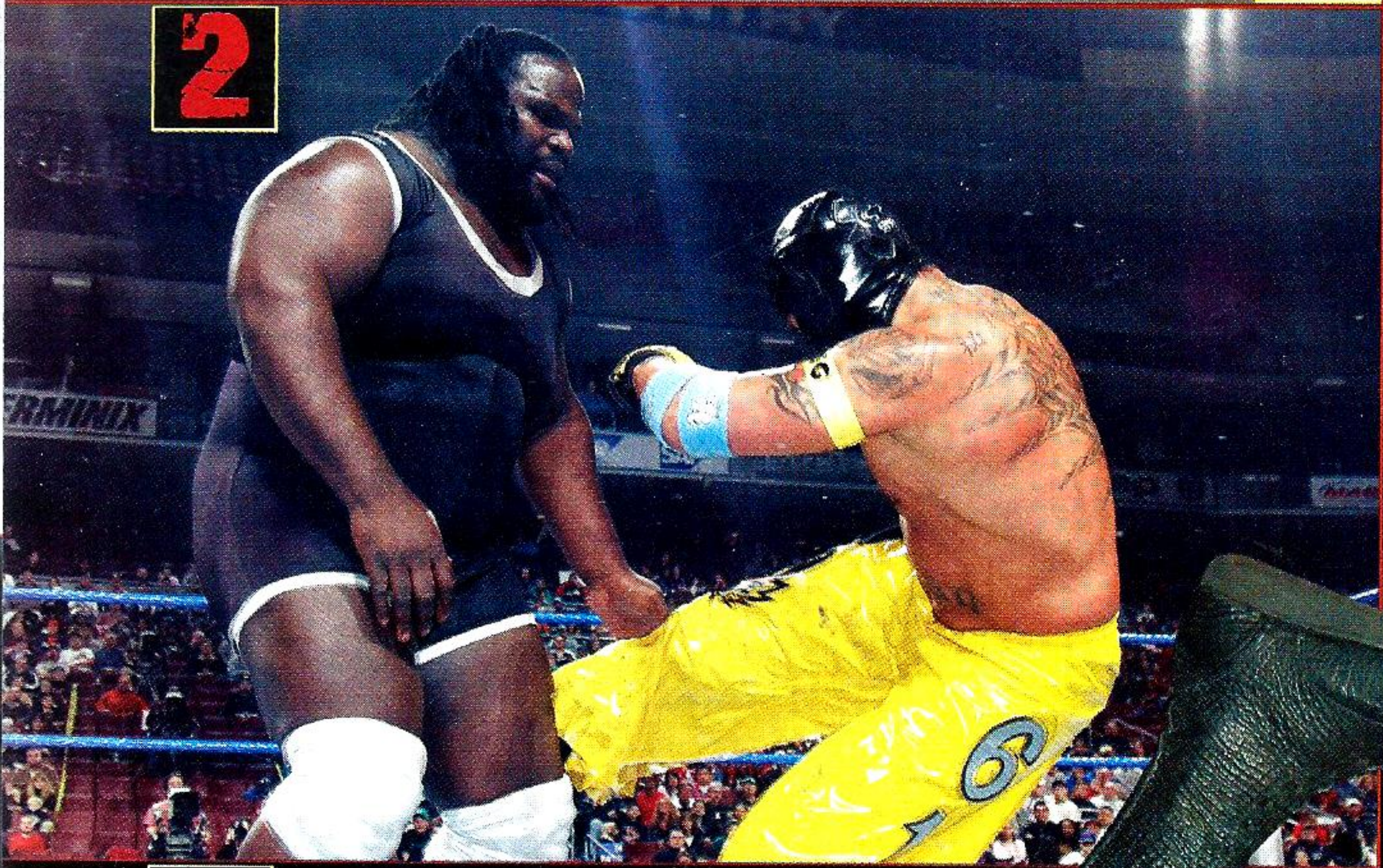


REY
MISTERIO JR.



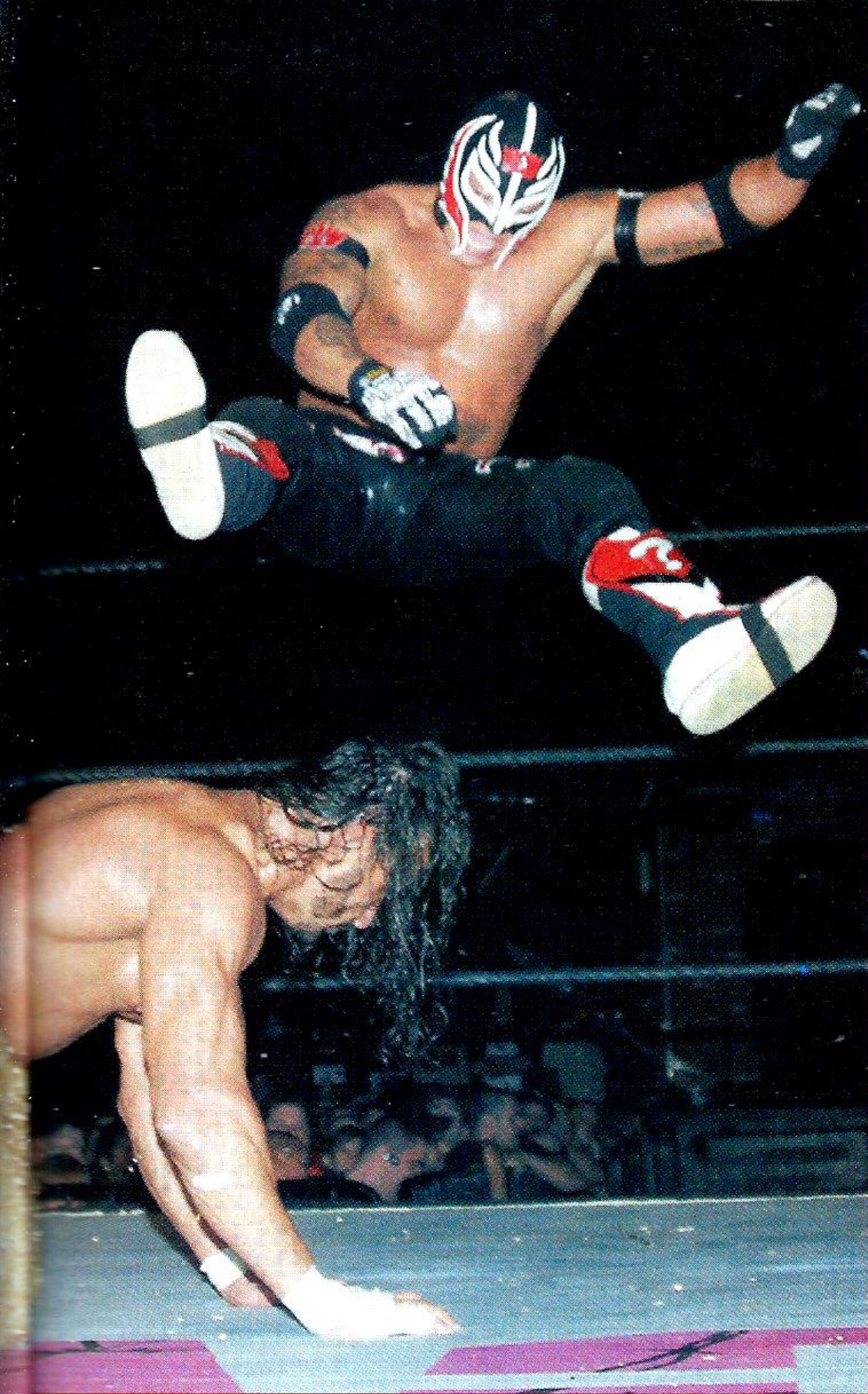


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REY MISTERIO JR.

- 1** Neither Randy Orton nor Kurt Angle could interfere with Misterio's destiny: winning the World title in memory of Eddie Guerrero.
- 2** After Batista was forced to surrender the Smackdown World title due to injury, Misterio entered—and nearly won—a 20-man battle royal for the strap. His main adversary in the match was Mark Henry—a man who would later plague his reign as champion.
- 3** Rey pinned Orton for the Smackdown World championship in a three-way match at WrestleMania 22.
- 4** Misterio and then-Smackdown World champion Batista forged an immediate bond in the weeks following the sudden death of mutual friend Eddie Guerrero. The duo would go on to win the Smackdown World tag team title together.
- 5** A match against Gregory Helms must seem easy to Misterio, who struggled mightily against numerous huge opponents, albeit in non-title matches.
- 6** Misterio and Sabu's vicious match at ECW's One Night Stand II in June ends in a no-contest when neither man is able to continue after Sabu sends both men through a table with a huge legdrop.



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SAMOA JOE

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Samoa Joe is the hottest property in TNA. He's a two-time former X division champion who has yet to be pinned or made to tap out. It looks like he's ready to graduate from the X division and begin the hunt for the NWA World title. He's gone from being a big fish in the relatively small pond of Ring of Honor to being an even bigger fish in TNA. He's also

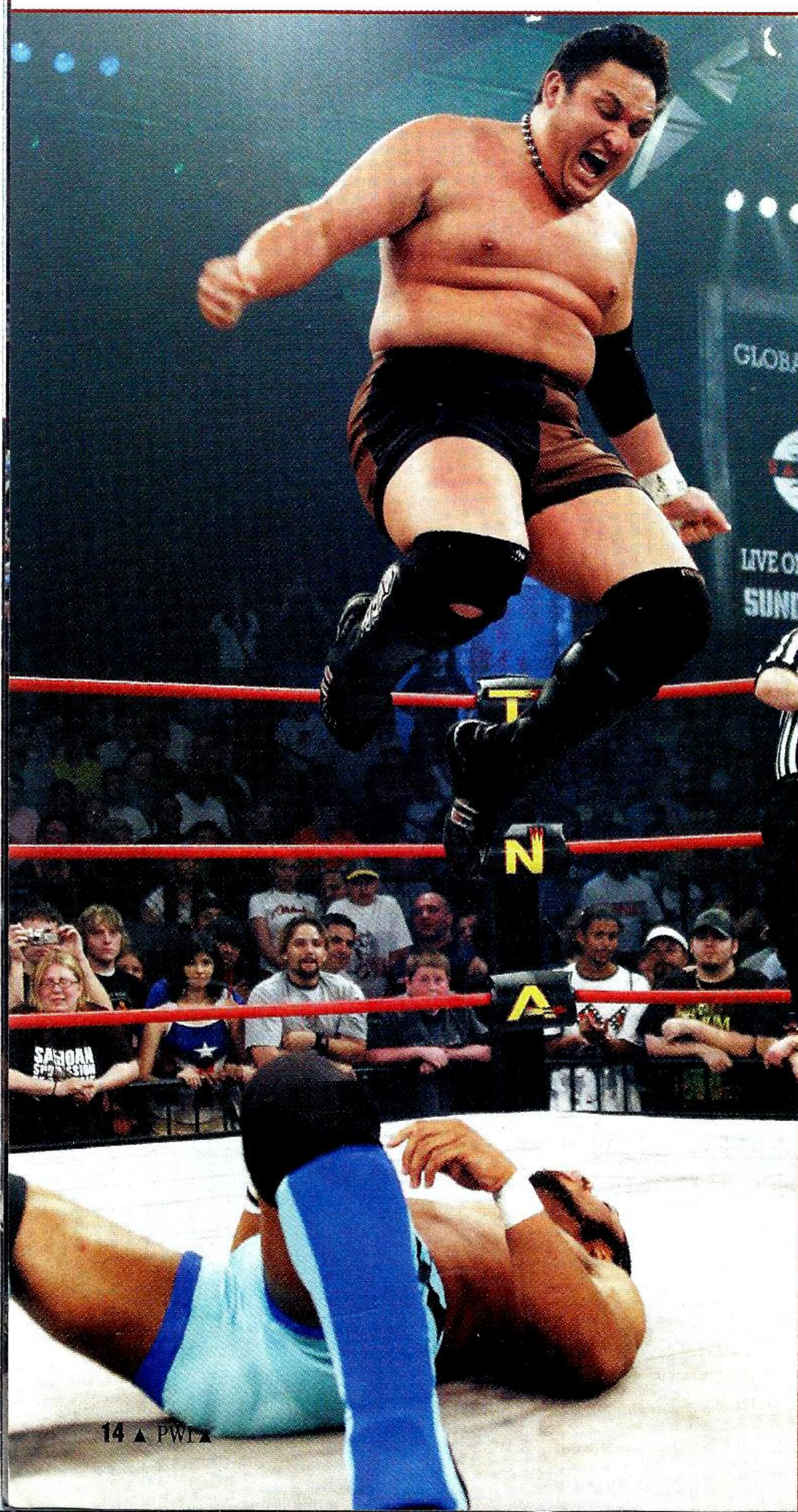
done ROH proud by showing that the longest-reigning ROH champ is a force to be reckoned with and not an indy wrestler who's not ready for prime time. Mission accomplished. **GRADE: A+**

MARKETABILITY: Joe has been in TNA for less than a year, and he already has a *Best Of Samoa Joe* DVD on the market—and it's one of the top-selling DVDs in TNA history. Everything about Joe—from his look to his style to his loner approach—is different from everyone else in TNA. Joe stands out, and he delivers in the ring. He has the potential to be the most marketable wrestler TNA has ever had. **GRADE: A+**

REPERTOIRE: The first thing you notice about Samoa Joe is the incredible stiffness of his strikes. The next thing you notice is his deceptive speed. And after that, you notice that Joe can wrestle just as well as he can brawl. Joe trained under shootfighter Bas Rutten and is skilled in the art of submission grappling. He may have the most in-depth assortment of chokes in his arsenal since Tazz. Joe is not only a former ROH champion, but he's also a former ROH Pure champion. That belt is defended under rules that reward wrestlers who are skilled in a variety of styles and have more than a standard five or six moves in their cache. TNA fans are going to find that Joe brings a lot more to the table than they have seen so far. **GRADE: A+**

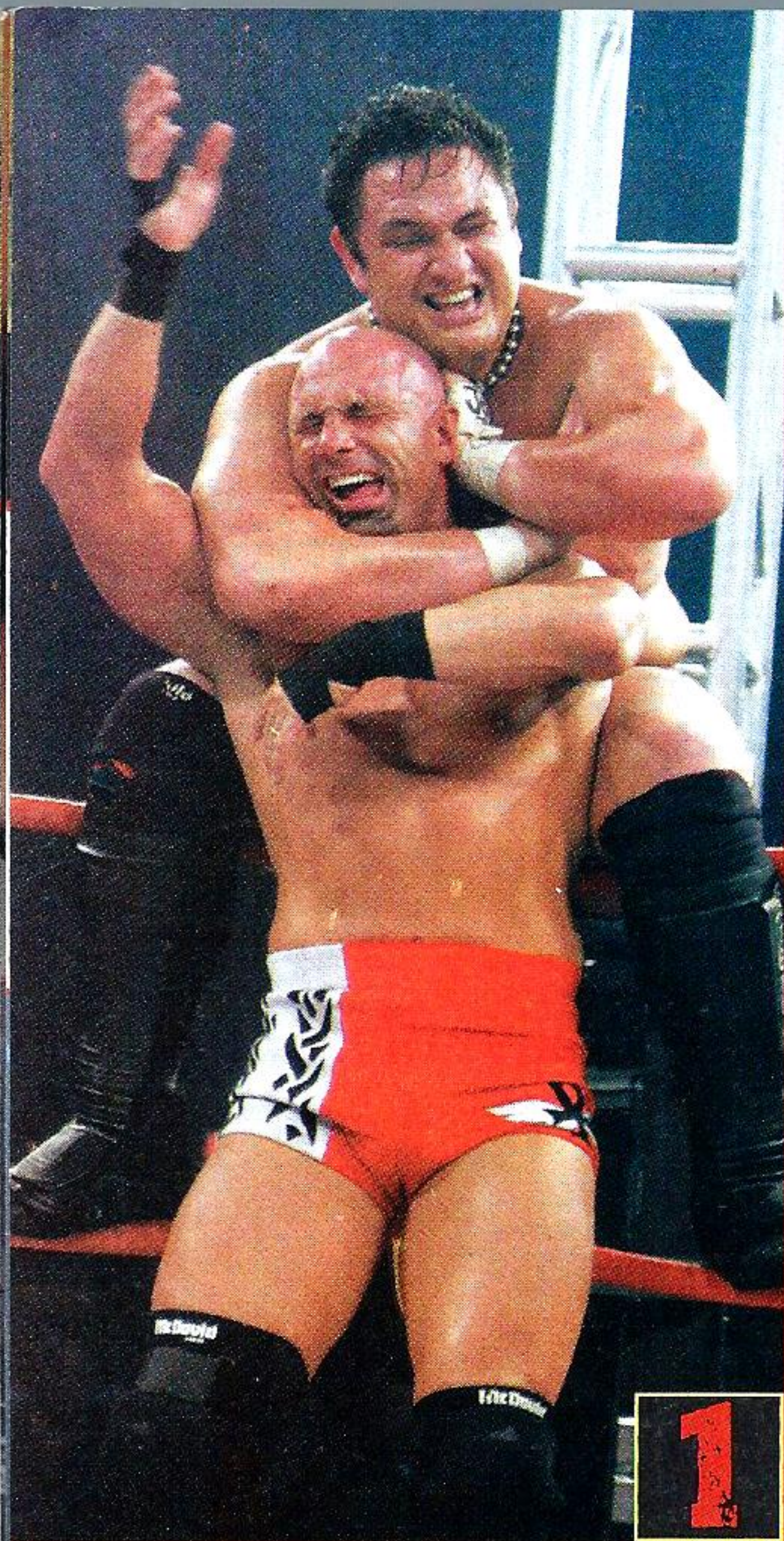
CAREER GROWTH: One on one, Joe is probably the best wrestler in TNA. But TNA isn't always about one-on-one matches. Joe's first X division title reign came to an end in an Ultimate X match, which is just as much a monkey bars climbing contest as it is a wrestling match. The NWA World title is routinely defended in stipulation-laden multiple-man train wrecks like the "King Of The Mountain" matches. Joe is out of his element in those crazy matches. He has to avoid those multiple man matches, where he can lose without being pinned or submitting. If he stays on the path he's been on since debuting in TNA, he'll be the NWA World champion by November. If he falls into the multiple-man trap, all bets are off. **GRADE: A+**

OVERALL VALUE: If Samoa Joe were to leave TNA, it would be a crippling blow. Joe is TNA's blue chip stock. No one else comes close. **GRADE: A+**

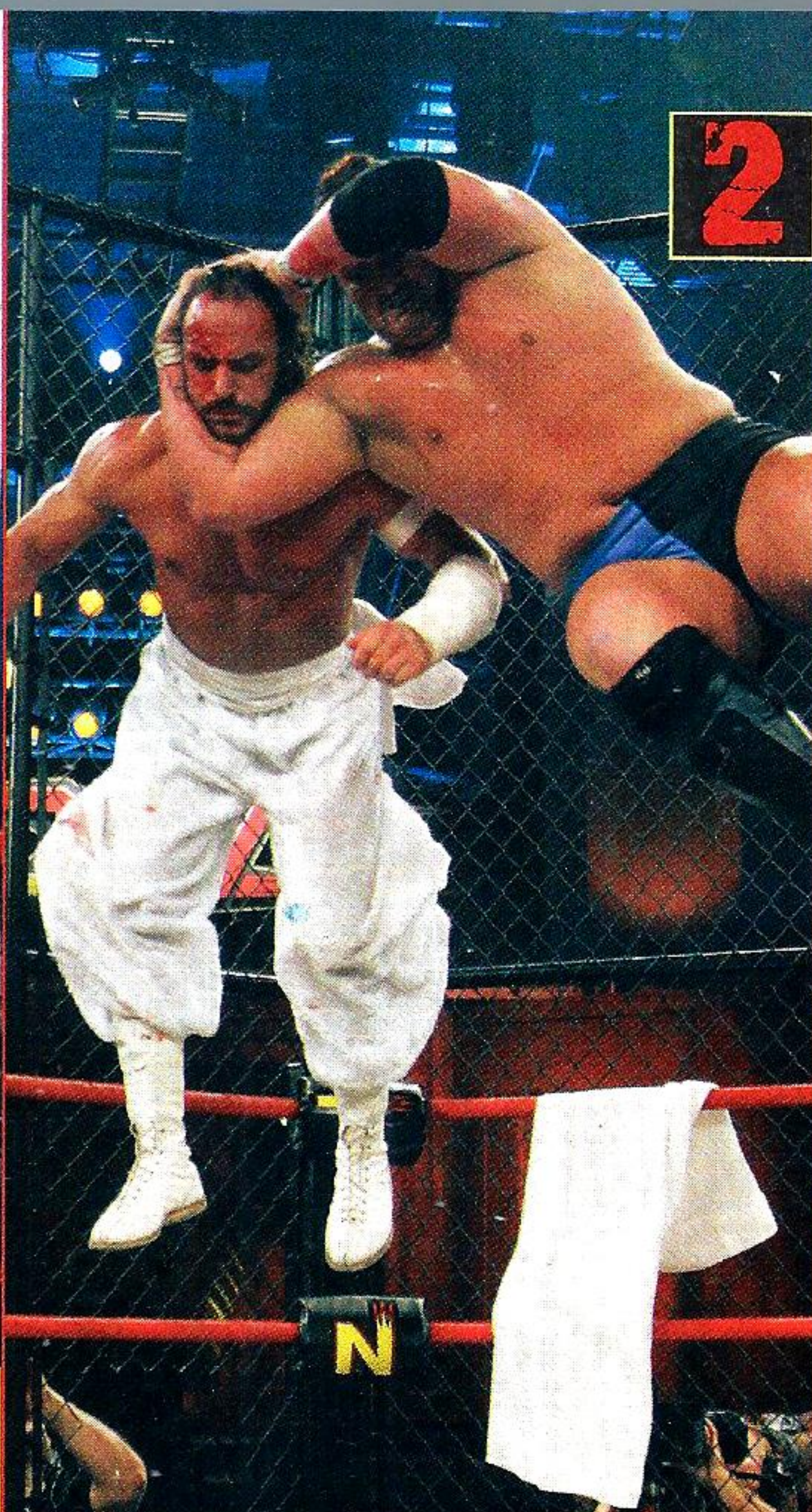


SAMOA
JOE

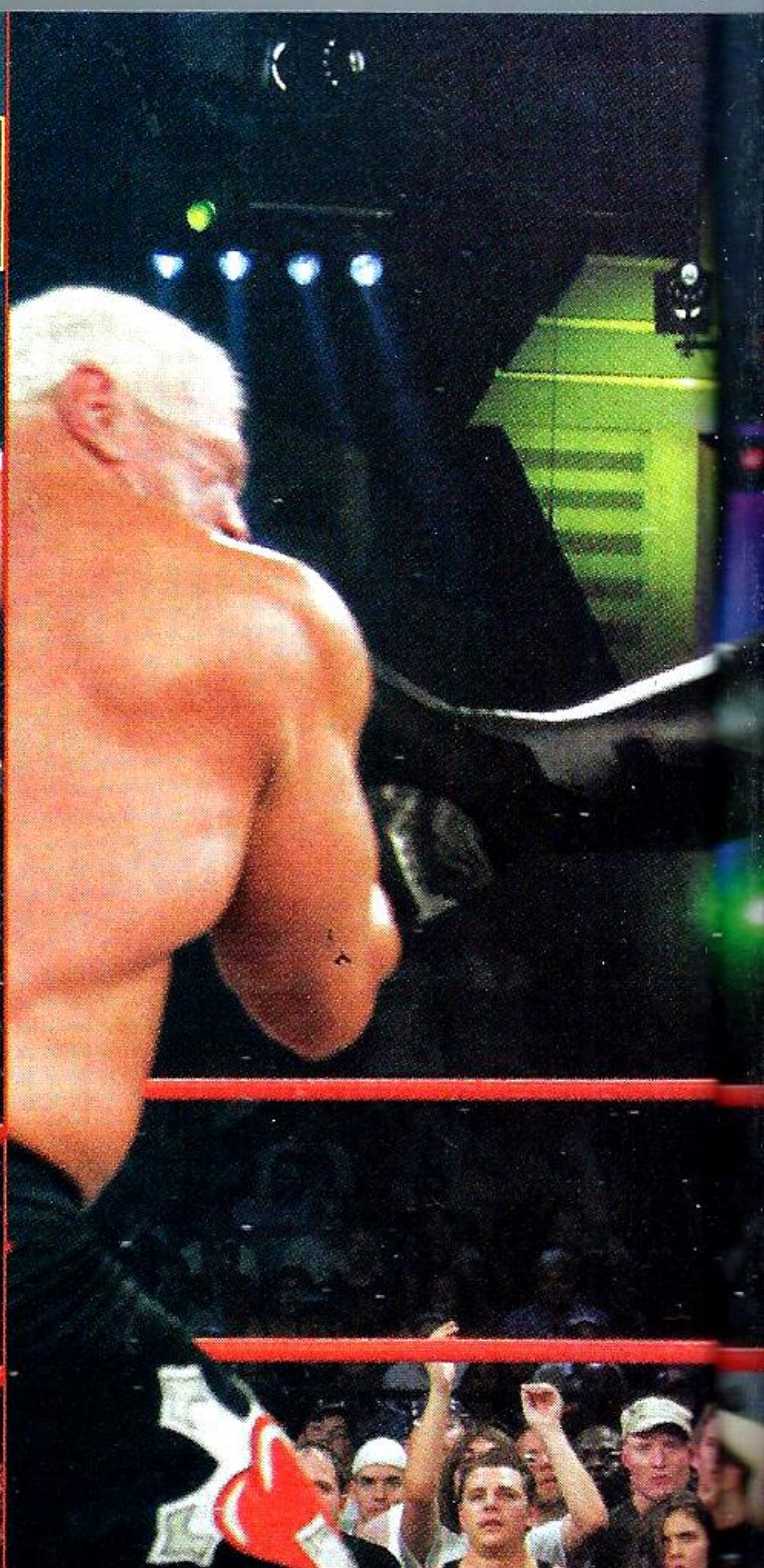




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SAMOA JOE



- 1** Joe's greatest adversary at the start of 2006 was likely "The Fallen Angel" Christopher Daniels. While Joe got the best of him more often than not, Daniels separated Joe from the X title at Destination X.
- 2** Although he was out of his element, Joe's toughness shone through when he defeated ECW's Sabu at in a cage match at TNA's Lockdown pay-per-view.
- 3** Joe seemed poised to enter the NWA World title picture by mid-2006 and began taking on wrestlers such as Jeff Jarrett and Scott Steiner.
- 4** A.J. Styles also gave Joe some trouble in 2006, however the "Samoa Submission Machine" fared much better against "The Phenomenal" one.
- 5** Scott Steiner proved to be a formidable first test for Joe as he gravitated from the X division.
- 6** Steiner's brute strength was no match for Joe's repertoire of moves as the former X champion was able to defeat "Big Poppa Pump" at Slammiversary.



EDGE

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Edge waited until the perfect moment to cash in his money-in-the-bank contract at New Year's Revolution and surprise a depleted John Cena to win the Raw World title. His title reign lasted only a few weeks, but it was a huge breakthrough for Edge—a man who had struggled with a reputation of choking in big matches. Now Edge is a viable championship contender, and it's a good bet he'll regain the title again some time in the future. Plus, while we may not think it was "the greatest hardcore match of all-time" as Mick Foley claims, he did have some magic moments in his win over Foley at WrestleMania 22. The only thing that could have improved his grade would have been a longer title reign. **GRADE: A-**

MARKETABILITY: The moment Edge christened himself the "Rated R Superstar," his marketability went

through the roof. His (pardon the pun) edgy nickname looks great on a T-shirt (especially those that Lita wears), and Edge merchandise has been flying off the shelves of souvenir stands. Edge may be a rulebreaker—and a particularly obnoxious one at that—but he has a sort of anti-authority coolness about him like an early DeGeneration X or NWO. He's a rulebreaker with a sizeable fan base—and his flowing blond locks and good looks certainly don't hurt with the female demographic either. **GRADE: A+**

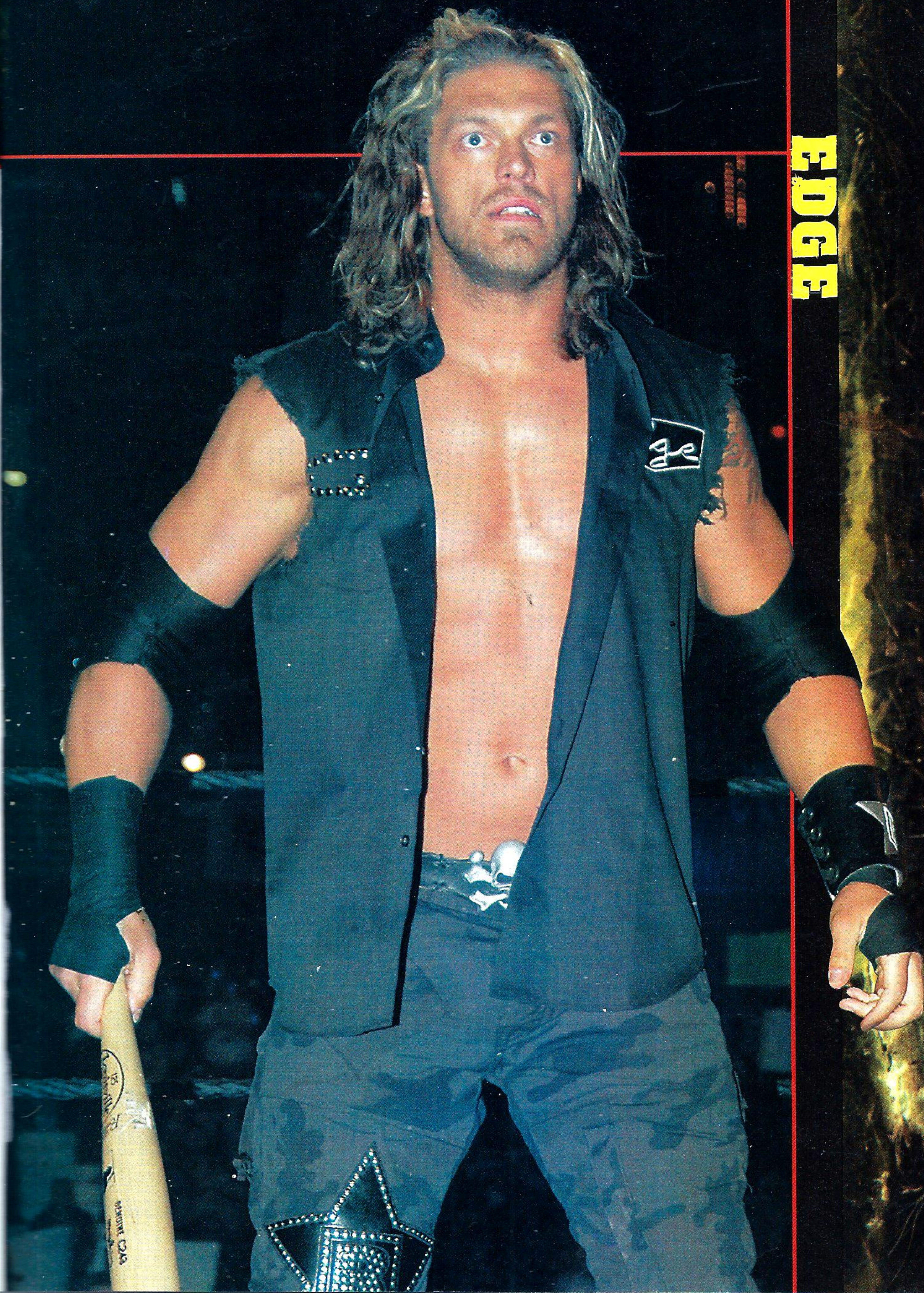
REPERTOIRE: These days, Edge relies almost exclusively on his spear to finish his matches, but his repertoire is much deeper than that one move. He has one of the best DDTs in the sport, and his half-nelson sitout facebuster is one of the most overlooked set-ups in wrestling. Though he does it less these days, Edge can still fly from the top rope, and his missile dropkick and spear off the top are almost always perfectly executed. For a guy named Edge, he's extremely well-rounded. **GRADE: A**

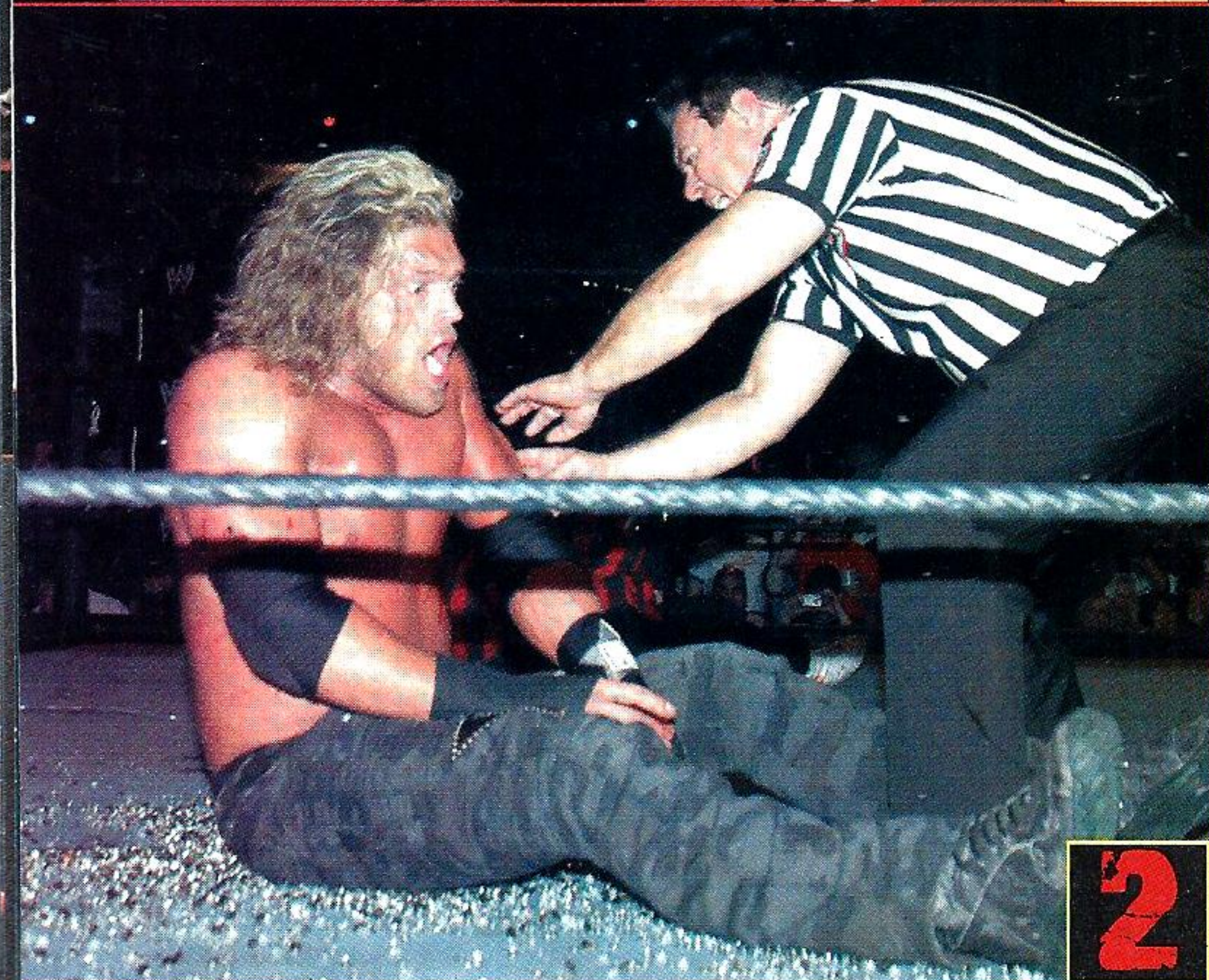
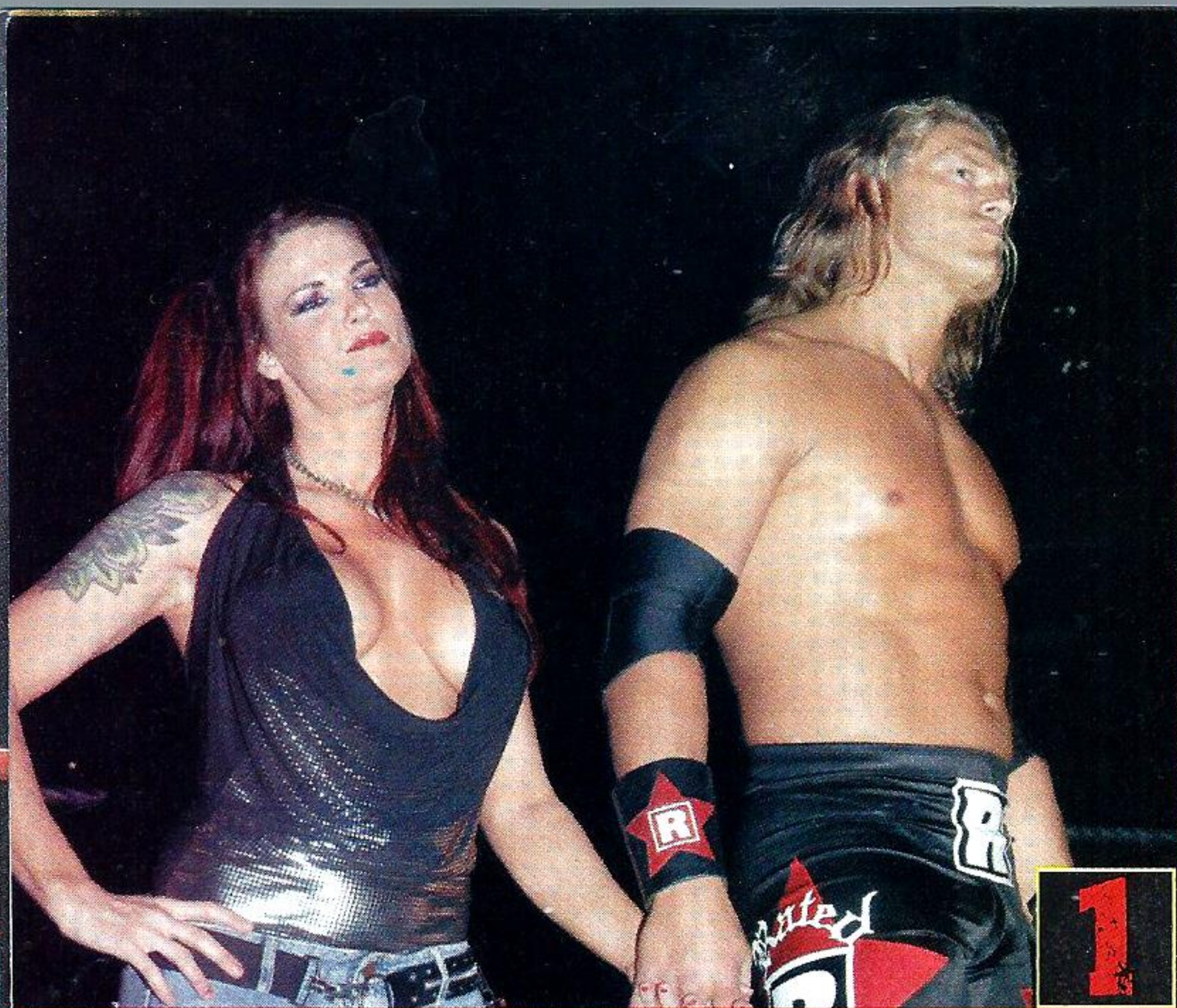
CAREER GROWTH: Edge's affair with Lita was a very messy situation for everyone involved, both personally and professionally. Matt Hardy was briefly released from WWE as a result, just to ease tension between parties. That could just as easily have been Edge. Instead, Edge and Lita embraced the controversy and turned their backstage relationship into an onscreen romance. It was certainly risky, but Edge reinvented himself as a result and his career took off. **GRADE: A**

OVERALL VALUE: So long as John Cena is a part of the WWE title picture, Edge will be, too. Edge matches up very well with Cena, as well as with Rob Van Dam. He's certainly capable of regaining the title, and, as he demonstrated with his "Live Sex Celebration," he can draw big ratings. Edge is one of WWE's top tier wrestlers and one of the guys the company wants to hold on to for the long haul. **GRADE: A**



EDGE

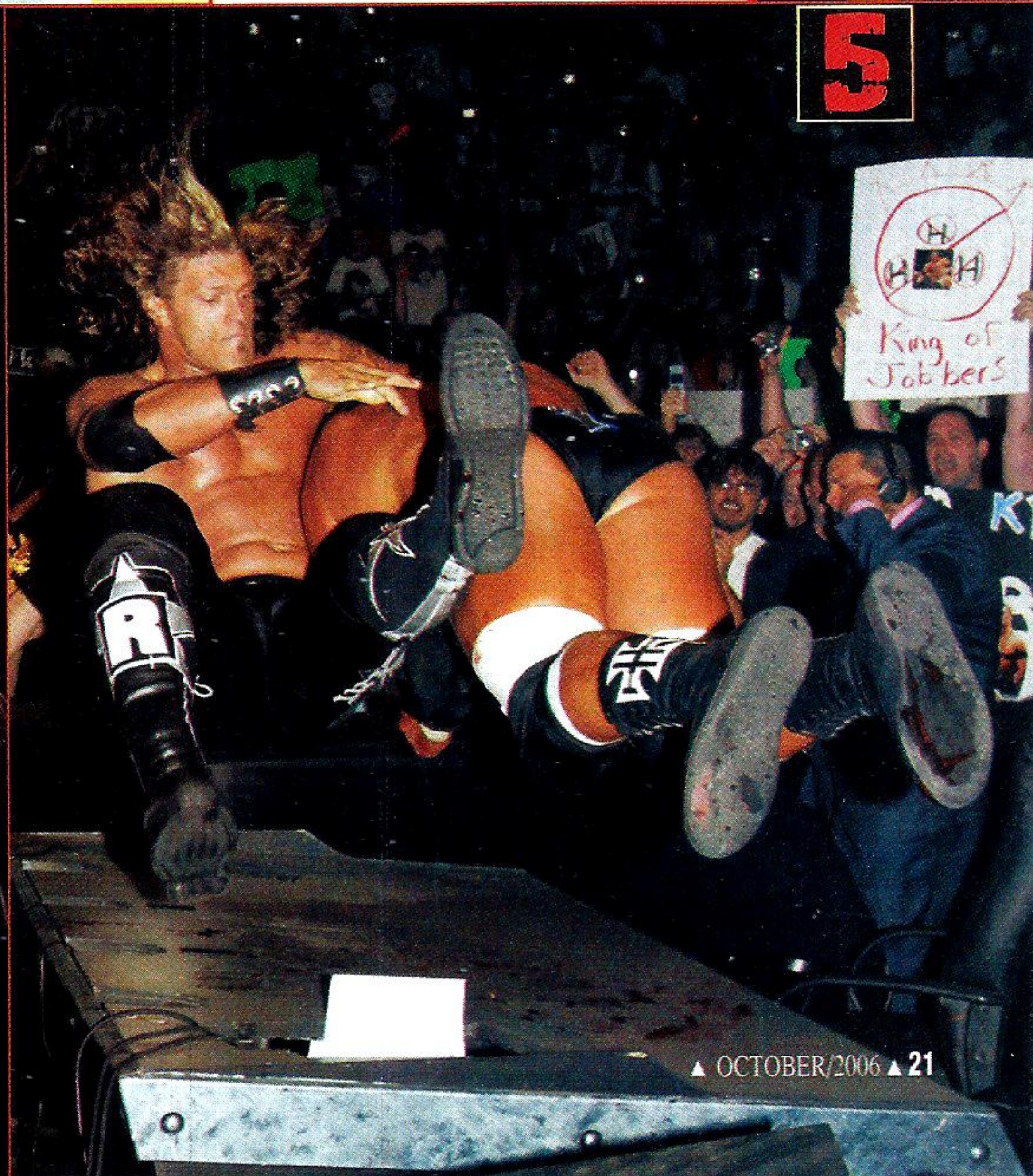






EDGE

- 1** With Lita in toe, Edge has bombarded *Raw* with his "Rated R Superstar" persona. All those who said he was an unconvincing bad guy are now eating their words.
- 2** His own maniacal device bit him in the derriere when Mick Foley sent Edge plummeting onto the thumbtacks Edge scattered in the ring at *WrestleMania 22*.
- 3** After his victory over Mick Foley at *WrestleMania*, Edge became the bloodthirsty, hardcore maverick that has been invading the newly established ECW brand with former enemy, Foley.
- 4** Edge tasted sweet *Raw* World championship victory, but only briefly, when he cashed in his money-in-the-bank in January at *New Year's Revolution*. He lost it three weeks later at *Royal Rumble*, but not before celebrating with a Lita sans censor-required clothing under a strategically placed sheet.
- 5** Edge's menacing tactics have given rise to his number of in ring appearances, taking on then-champion John Cena and Triple-H (pictured) in a bitter three-way feud for the *Raw* World title.
- 6** At *ECW One Night Stand II*, Edge and Foley, representing the WWE brands, teamed up to combat Terry Funk (pictured) and Tommy Dreamer, representing the new ECW brand.



SHAWN MICHAELS

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: The "Heartbreak Kid" did what every WWE wrestler would love to do once in his career—utterly humiliate Vince McMahon at WrestleMania. Shawn Michaels has done just about everything there is to do in the world of wrestling, but standing up to McMahon and then reforming De-Generation X with Triple-H may be the most satisfying thing he's done since he first won the WWF World title in 1996. Michaels looks like he's having fun again—like he finally found his infamous smile. He's also added an element of much-needed unpredictability to Raw. **GRADE: A**

MARKETABILITY: Michaels didn't need a DX reunion to sell boatloads of merchandise ... but it certainly doesn't hurt. DX is a marketing juggernaut. **GRADE: A+**

REPERTOIRE: Remember when everyone was worried that Michaels was risking paralysis by competing with a surgically repaired back? He altered his style just enough to limit that risk, but it hasn't really affected his game much at all. Michaels still flies with the elbowdrop

off the top rope. He still has the flexibility to nail that "Sweet Chin Music" on opponents big and small. Heck, he can still kip up to his feet after being flat on his back. He's slowed down maybe a half a step from his prime and maybe a quarter of a step from his 2005 Match of the Year against Kurt Angle, but he can still go. **GRADE: A-**

CAREER GROWTH: Michaels isn't contending for the Raw World title anymore, but he is embracing his role as a WWE legend. That's actually an admirable move in that it allows younger wrestlers like John Cena, Randy Orton, and Edge a chance to shine at the top of the card. Michaels has remained fresh and relevant, especially since reforming DX, and that allows him to continue to grow as a performer. The alternative would be Ric Flair, a legend who loses luster more and more with each passing year. **GRADE: A**

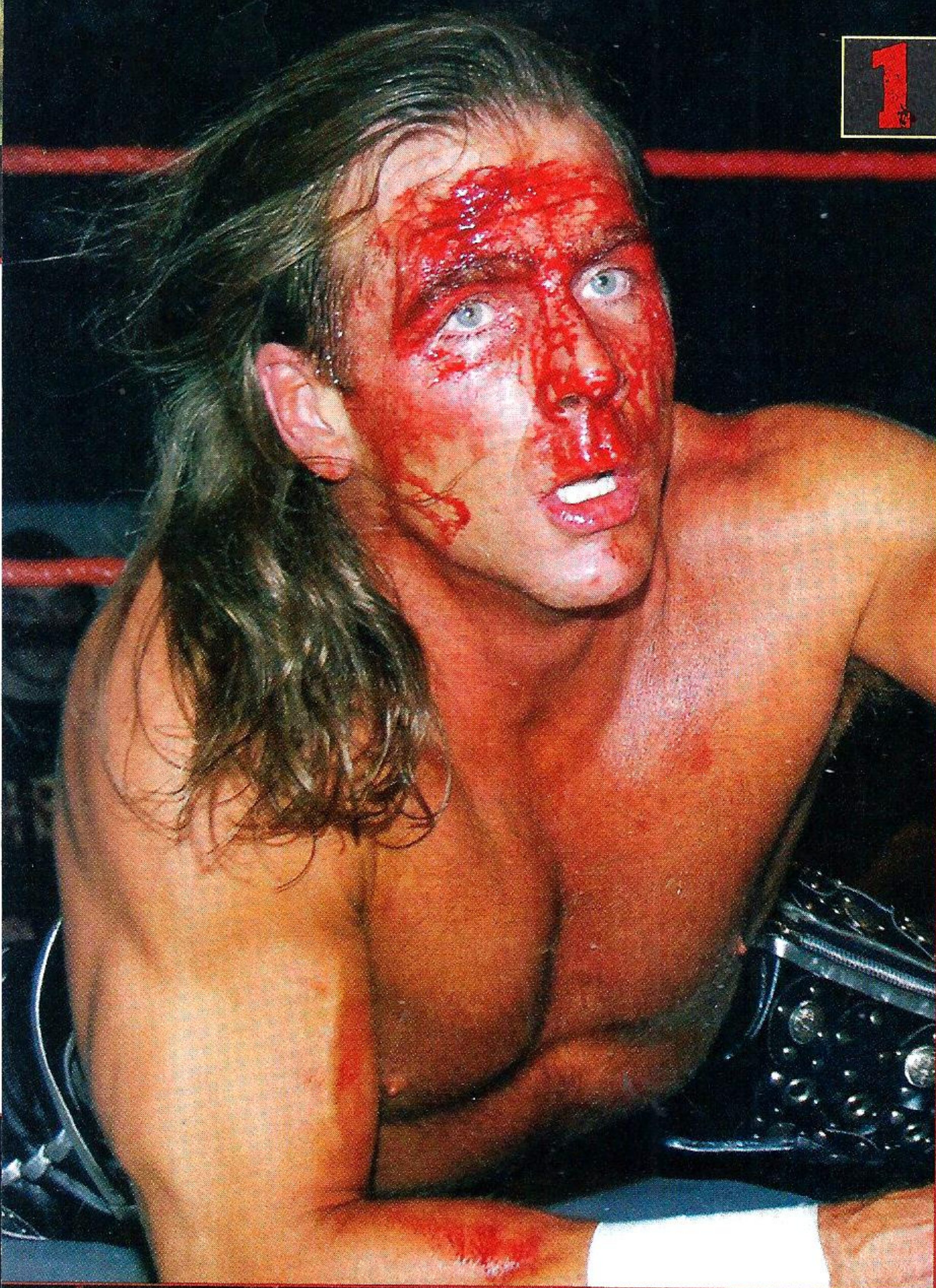
OVERALL VALUE: Michaels is an integral part of the Raw brand and WWE as a whole. DX promises to be the dominant Raw faction for 2006. Beyond that, there's plenty more worlds for Michaels to conquer.

Foley vs. Michaels would be a dream match, as would HBK vs. RVD (in ECW), Michaels vs. Rey Mysterio, and Michaels vs. Sabu. Any one of those matches is a potential Match of the Year candidate. Michaels can elevate young talent and still be a legitimate title contender in his own right. Michaels is one of the few remaining links from today's WWE to the glory days of the "Monday Night Wars." He has name recognition, marketability, and can still deliver in the ring. He is an invaluable resource to WWE. **GRADE: A**

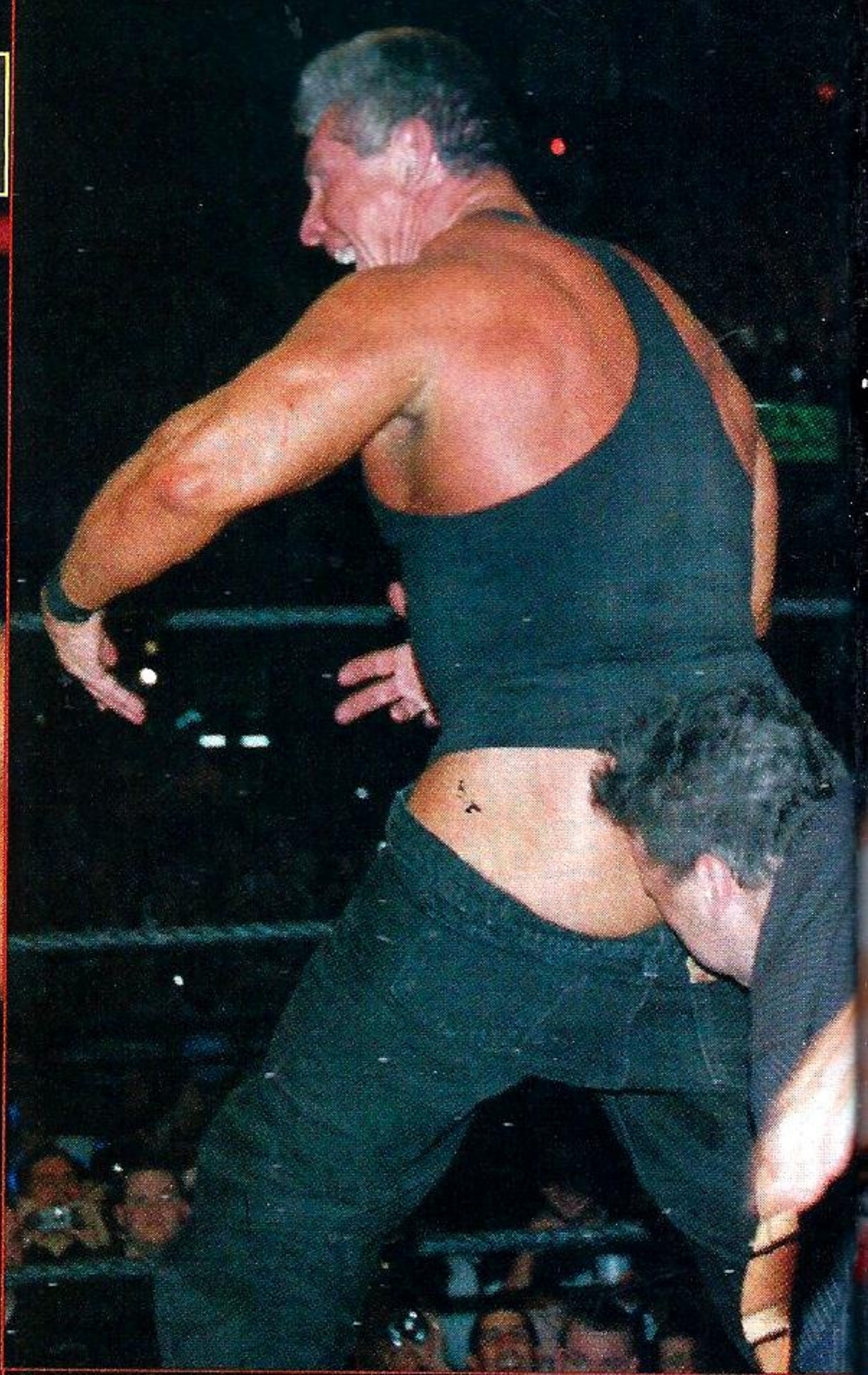


SHAWN
MICHAELS

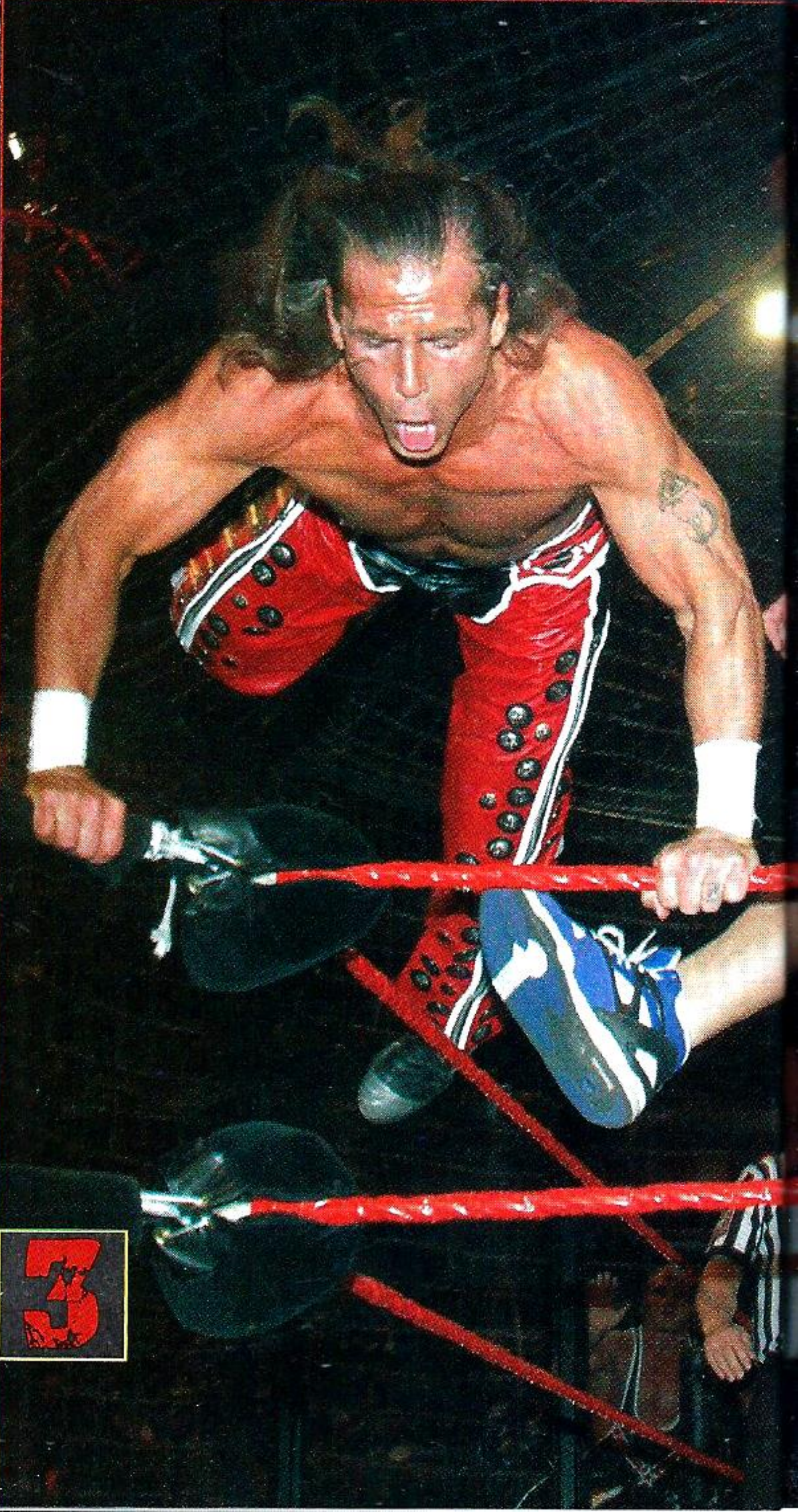




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SHAWN MICHAELS

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1 At times, Michaels was left battered and bloodied during his battle with Vinnie Mac and associates, but what McMahon didn't know was that Michaels was waiting for the straw that would break Helmsley's back before he would retaliate full force.

2 The Spirit Squad has been Mr. McMahon's secret weapon since early in the year, but, on many occasions, Michaels has single-handedly overtaken the team of five.

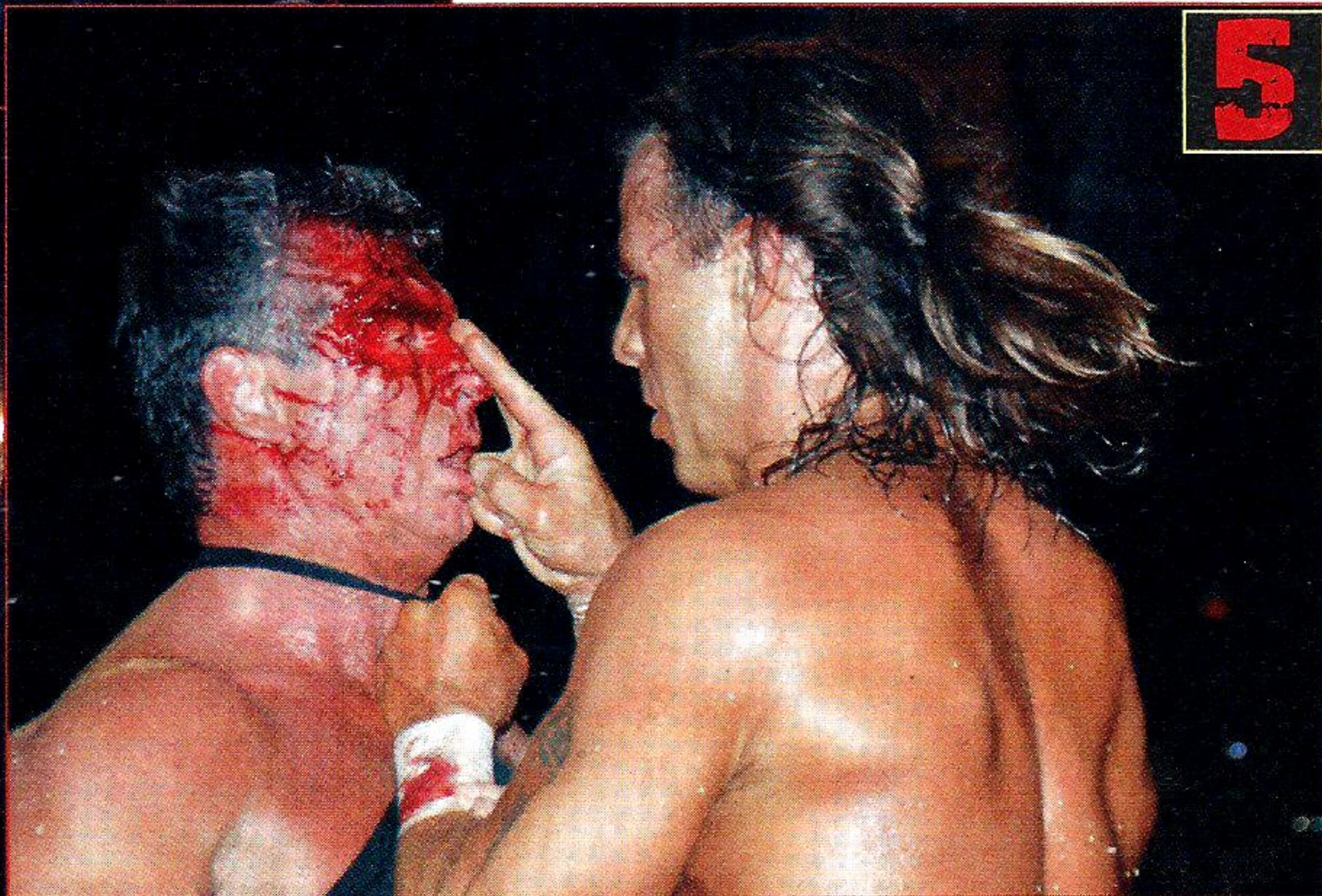
3 In the "Elimination Chamber" at New Year's Revolution in January, Shawn Michaels was eliminated early in the match, but after a feud with the McMahons and a reteaming with Triple-H, Michaels has bounced back well.

4 At WrestleMania 22, Michaels used a product of McMahon's own ridiculous egotism to teach the wrasslin' tycoon a lesson when McMahon ended up with a jumbo-sized version of his *Muscle & Fitness* cover around his shoulders.

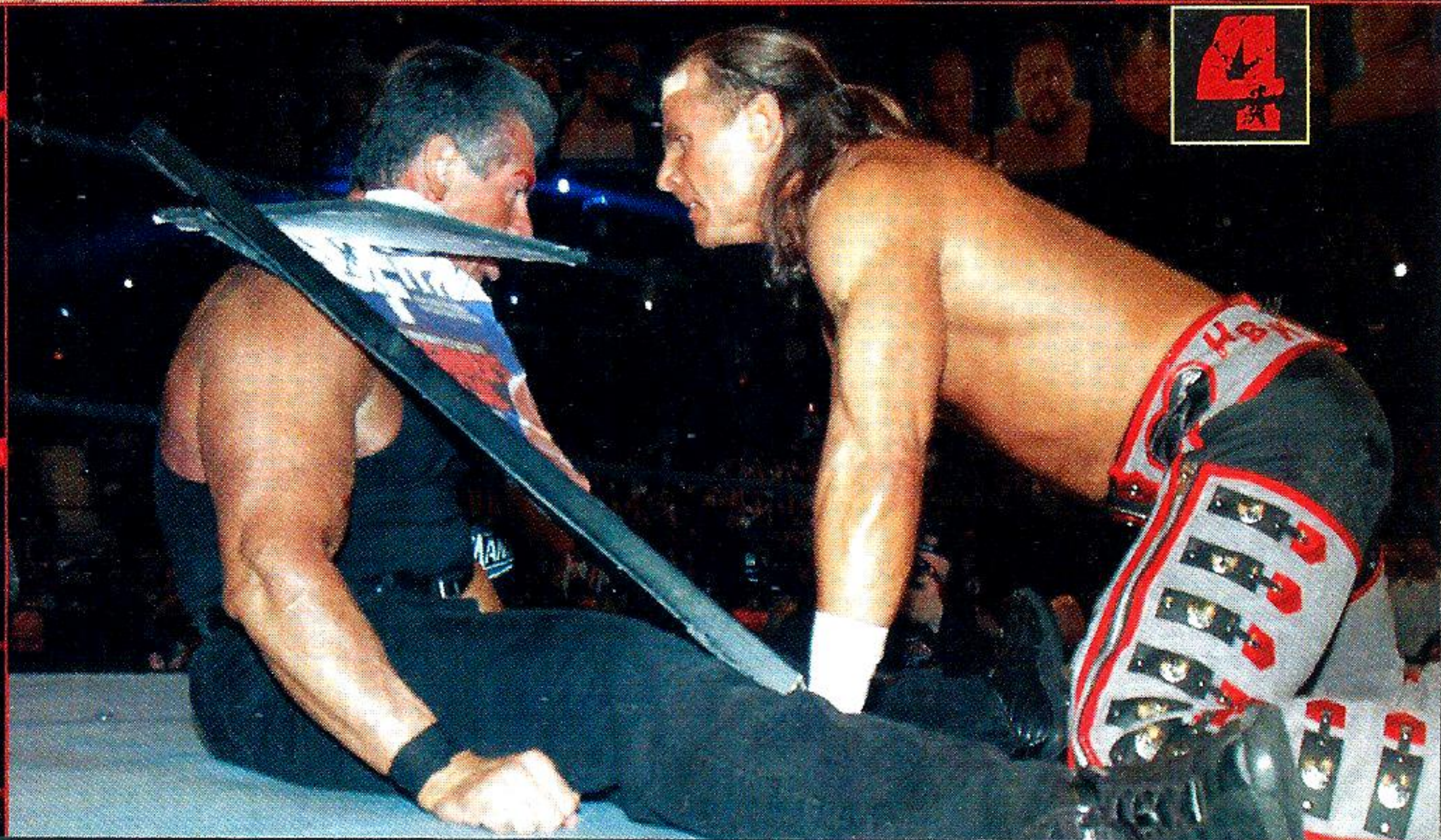
5 Mr. McMahon rues the day he made Michaels an enemy. And with the reunion of DX, Michaels is able to fully appreciate the retribution he and Triple-H have in store for the chief.

6 Time and again, McMahon has proven that his ego is his biggest flaw, especially when Michaels has used his own power-hungry tactics against him and his subordinate son, Shane.

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4



TRISH STRATUS

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Trish Stratus is the gold standard for women's wrestling. She is a six-time women's champion, and her most recent reign lasted an incredible 15 months. She still has a way to go to match The Fabulous Moolah's 28-year reign, but Moolah never had to wrestle four days a week in everything from standard matches to bra-and-panties bouts (thank goodness for that). Trish may have dropped the title at WrestleMania 22, but it's hard to imagine a scenario that doesn't involve her regaining it by year's end. She's achieved everything she has set out to do and then some. **GRADE: A+**

MARKETABILITY: Trish has forever changed the image of the term "lady wrestler," transforming the public's perception of women wrestlers from rampaging, manly brutes to ultra-athletic, ultra-feminine models. Trish sells tickets and draws ratings, sells DVDs and magazines, and has enough mainstream appeal to be an ambassador for WWE. She doesn't look out of place walking the red carpet or appearing on talk shows. Forget about finding the "next Hulk Hogan" or the "next Steve Austin." WWE should be worried about trying to find the "next Trish Stratus." She may well be irreplaceable. **GRADE: A+**

REPERTOIRE: When people think of Trish's moveset, they tend to focus on the "Stratusfaction," the "chick kick," or her running bulldog. Those are great moves, but there's another aspect of Trish's game that deserves attention—her impressive counter-wrestling abilities. She is a master of avoiding dangerous attacks by feigning disorientation, daring her opponents to go for that knockout move. Then she evades that big strike with her Matrix-style backbend, and retaliates with a knockout shot of her own. Sometimes, the ability to draw an opponent in for the kill is even more valuable than simply knowing a lot of good finishers. **GRADE: A**

CAREER GROWTH: We hope Trish doesn't make the same move Stacy Keibler did, but we'd be naïve if we didn't realize the lure of Hollywood. Trish could become an action star or go back to modeling—either option would cut down on her risk of injury and give her more time off the road. Hopefully, even though she has flirted with mainstream interests, Trish will come back from her shoulder injury and focus her efforts on regaining the women's title. She has nothing left to prove, but we're not ready to see her leave just yet. **GRADE: A**

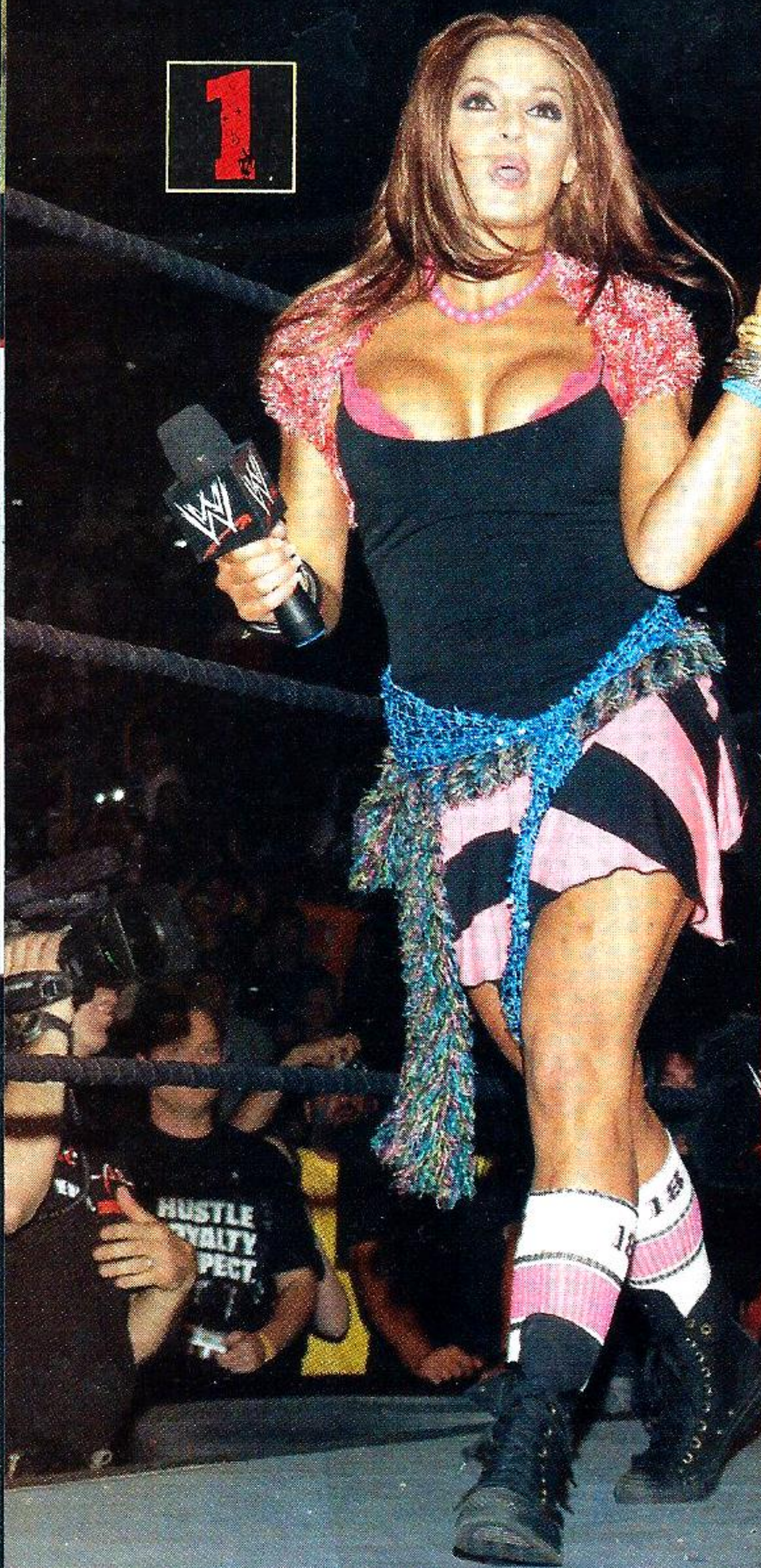
OVERALL VALUE: Trish is absolutely vital to the continued health of the women's division. Whether she's a wrestler, a goodwill ambassador to the mainstream press (and wrestling needs as many of those as possible), or a sex symbol, Trish is invaluable to WWE. She's also invaluable to the sport of wrestling and an influence to countless aspiring women wrestlers everywhere. **GRADE: A**



TRISH
STRATUS



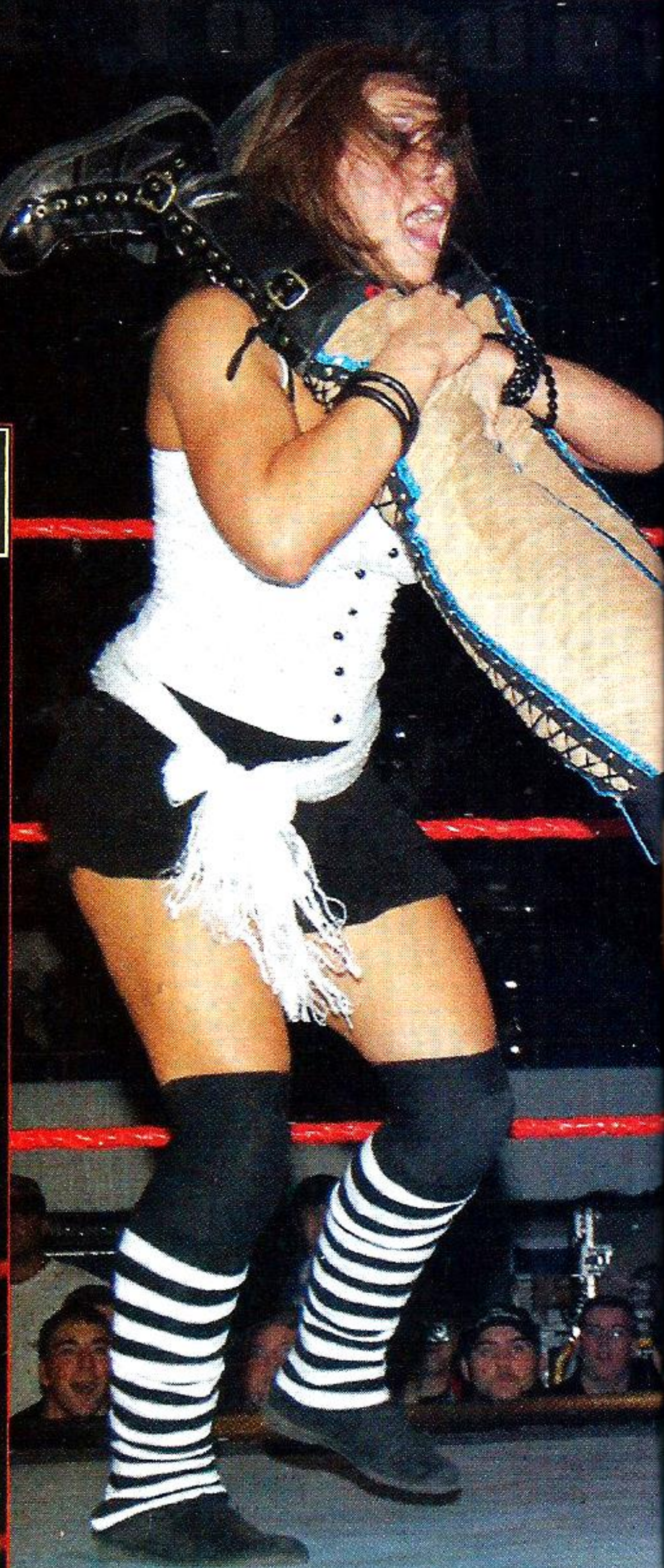
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TRISH STRATUS

1 Without the women's title for the first time in over a year, Stratus resorted to role reversal in an effort to disrupt James' psychological advantage in their feud.

2 Trish Stratus' life changed drastically when Mickie James entered the picture. It quickly became clear that James' fanaticism could turn dangerous at any moment.

3 The highly touted rematch at Backlash saw James defend the title and Stratus suffer a brutal shoulder injury that would sideline her for over a month.

4 At WrestleMania 22, Stratus put her 15-month women's title reign on the line against James, whose psychological tactics had gotten the better of the champion.

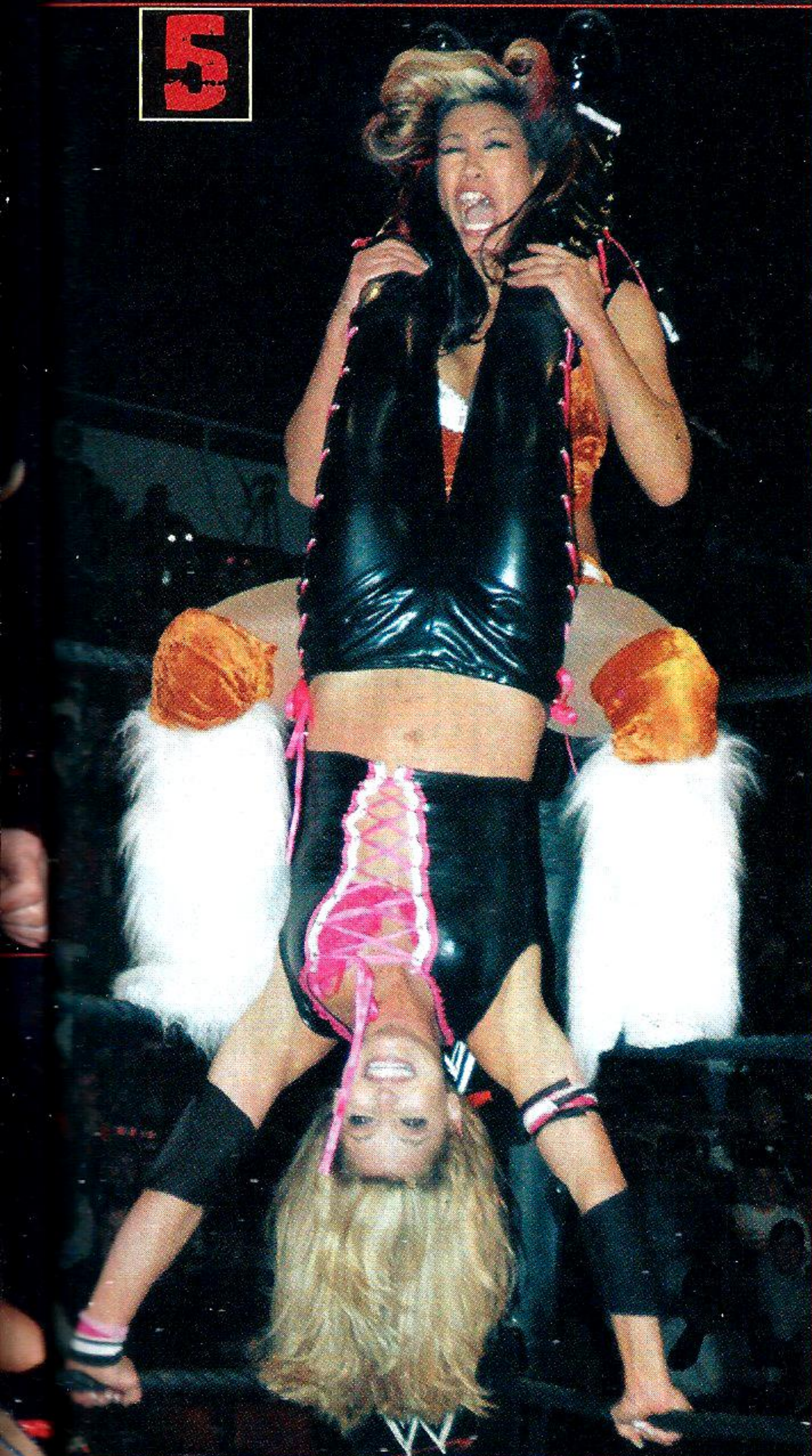
5 Stratus returned to action in late-June and immediately revived an old rivalry with Melina, who, with Johnny Nitro, moved to Raw after Teddy Long fired them from the Smackdown brand.

6 The James-Stratus 'Mania slugfest was widely acclaimed as one of the best WWE women's matches in recent history, with the challenger getting best of the seasoned veteran.

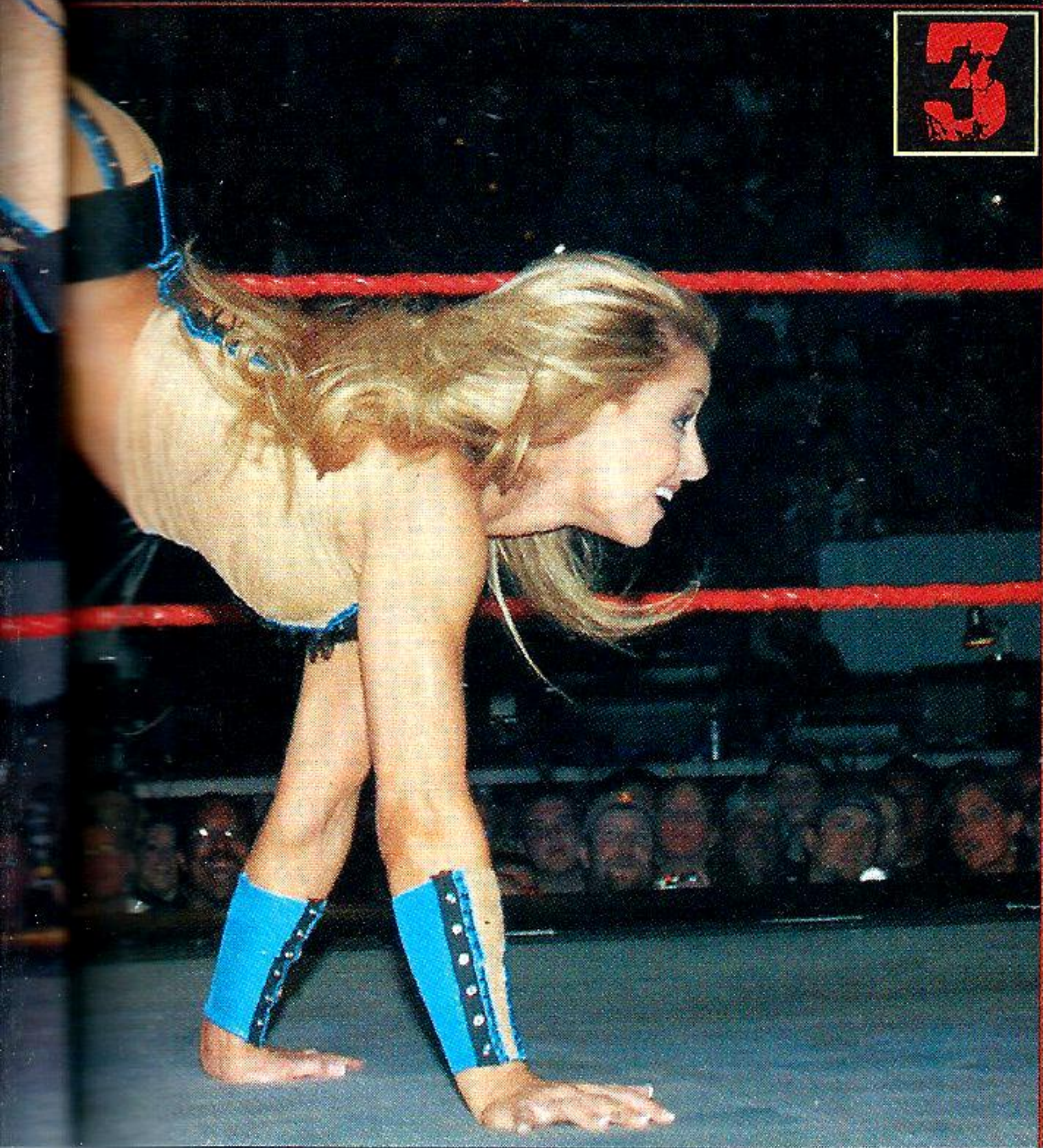
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AMERICA'S MOST WANTED

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: James Storm and Chris Harris jumpstarted their career by turning their backs on the fans and teaming up with Jeff Jarrett. They regained the NWA World tag title, and it took a dream team of Christopher Daniels and A.J. Styles to take the straps away from them. America's Most Wanted has been a terrific tag team for years now. The biggest knock on them has been their lack of a killer instinct. After all, this was the same team that dropped the NWA World tag title to the then-unheralded duo of Chase Stevens and Andy Douglas. Since turning rulebreakers, Harris and Storm have let their personalities shine through. Storm, in particular, has been very entertaining in his role as the drunken

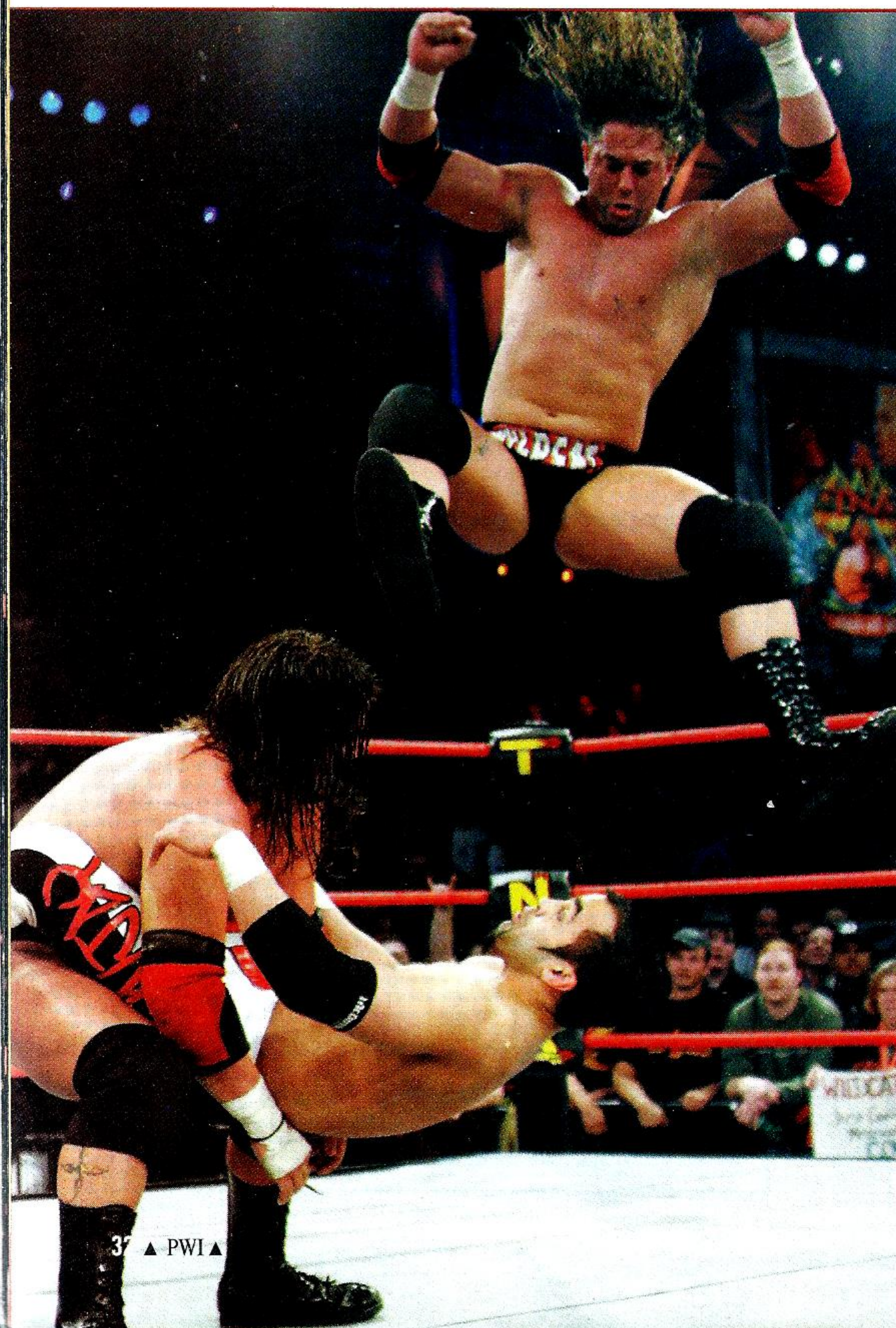
cowboy. With his beer bottles as weapons, Harris' insufferable arrogance, and the pulse-quickening Gail Kim at their side, America's Most Wanted has become the most well-rounded team in TNA. **GRADE: A**

MARKETABILITY: AMW now has a legitimate claim to being the best tag team in wrestling. Being associated with Jarrett isn't going to help their image, but any true fan of the art of tag team wrestling has to recognize that Storm and Harris are the real deal. America's Most Wanted now has the swagger it had been missing all along. **GRADE: B+**

REPERTOIRE: As we pointed out in last year's "Report Card", America's Most Wanted has an impressive array of double-team maneuvers, but almost all of those moves were originally popularized by other tandems. Their "Death Sentence" was perfected by Demolition, the "Hart Attack" by the Hart Foundation, and the veg-o-matic by The Midnight Express. AMW still needs its own unique signature spot—and we don't mean smashing a beer bottle on an opponent's noggin. **GRADE: B**

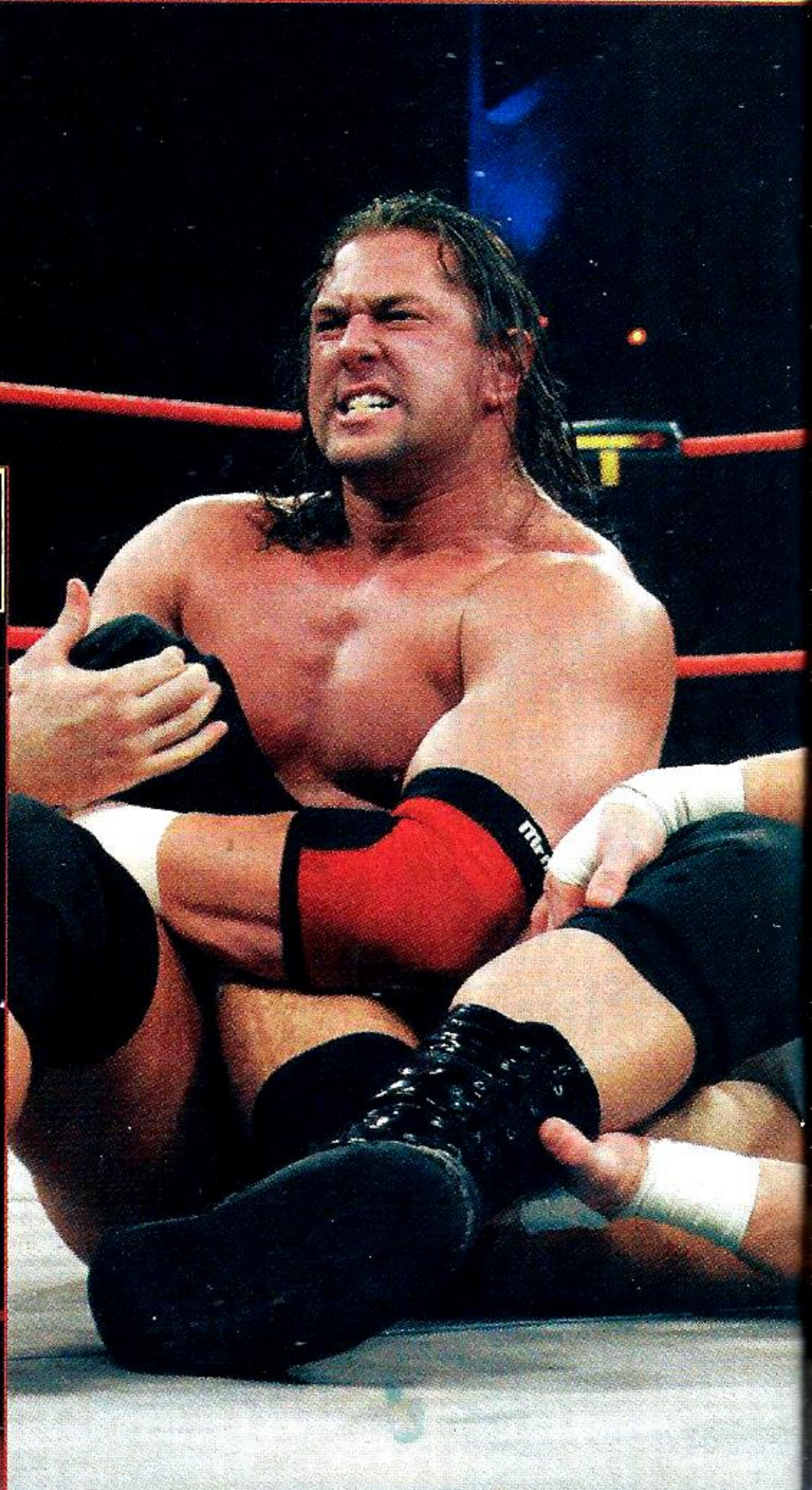
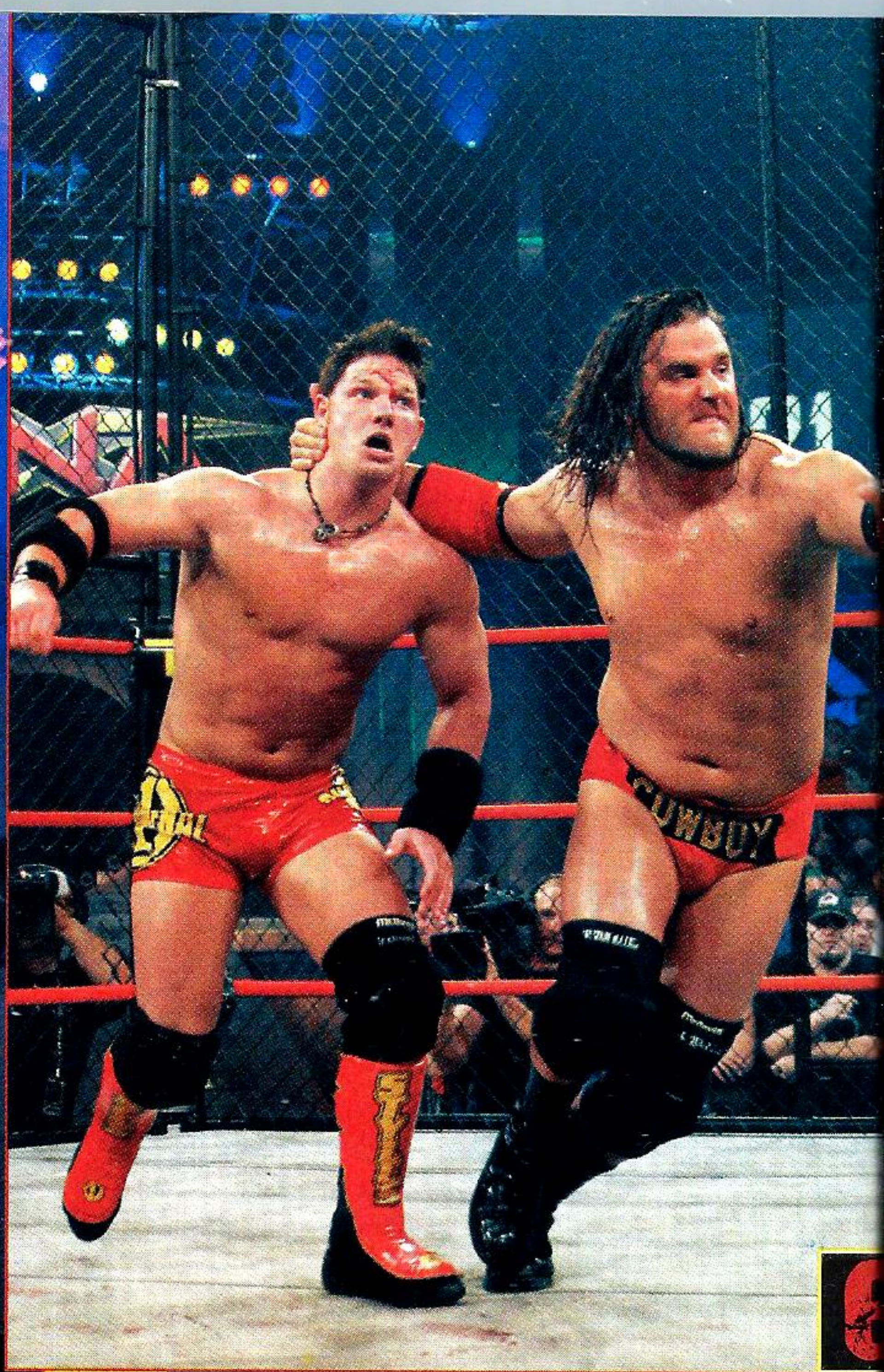
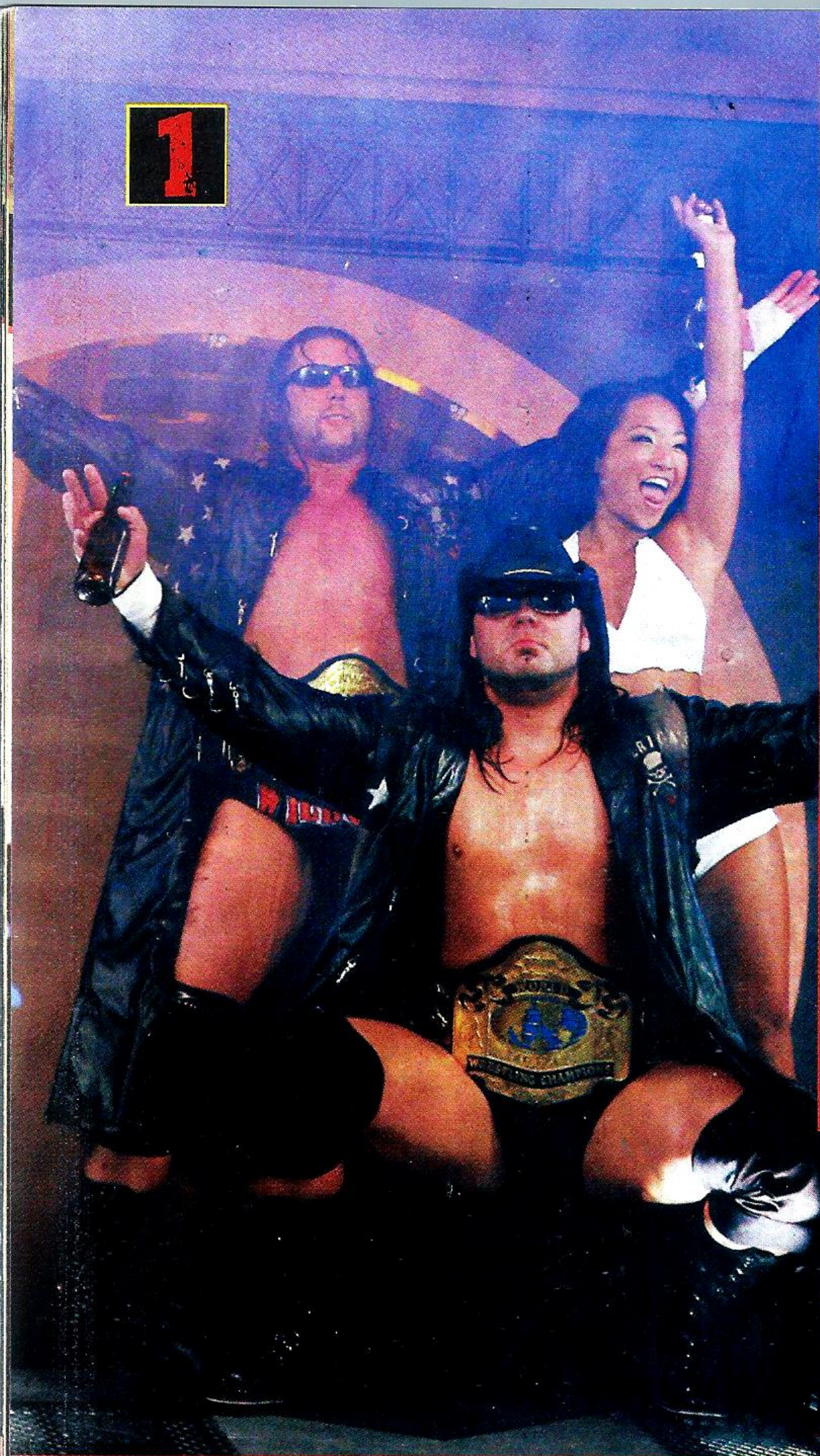
CAREER GROWTH: AMW is unquestionably TNA's top tag team. The team has won the most championships and has been part of some of the promotion's biggest matches. There's still a lot of time left in 2006, but Harris and Storm have to be considered the front-runners for Tag Team of the Year. Now, AMW needs to test itself against top competition. Before they go back after Daniels and Styles, they need to convincingly beat Team 3D and The James Gang to reaffirm their dominance. Then it's time to take back their championship. **GRADE: A-**

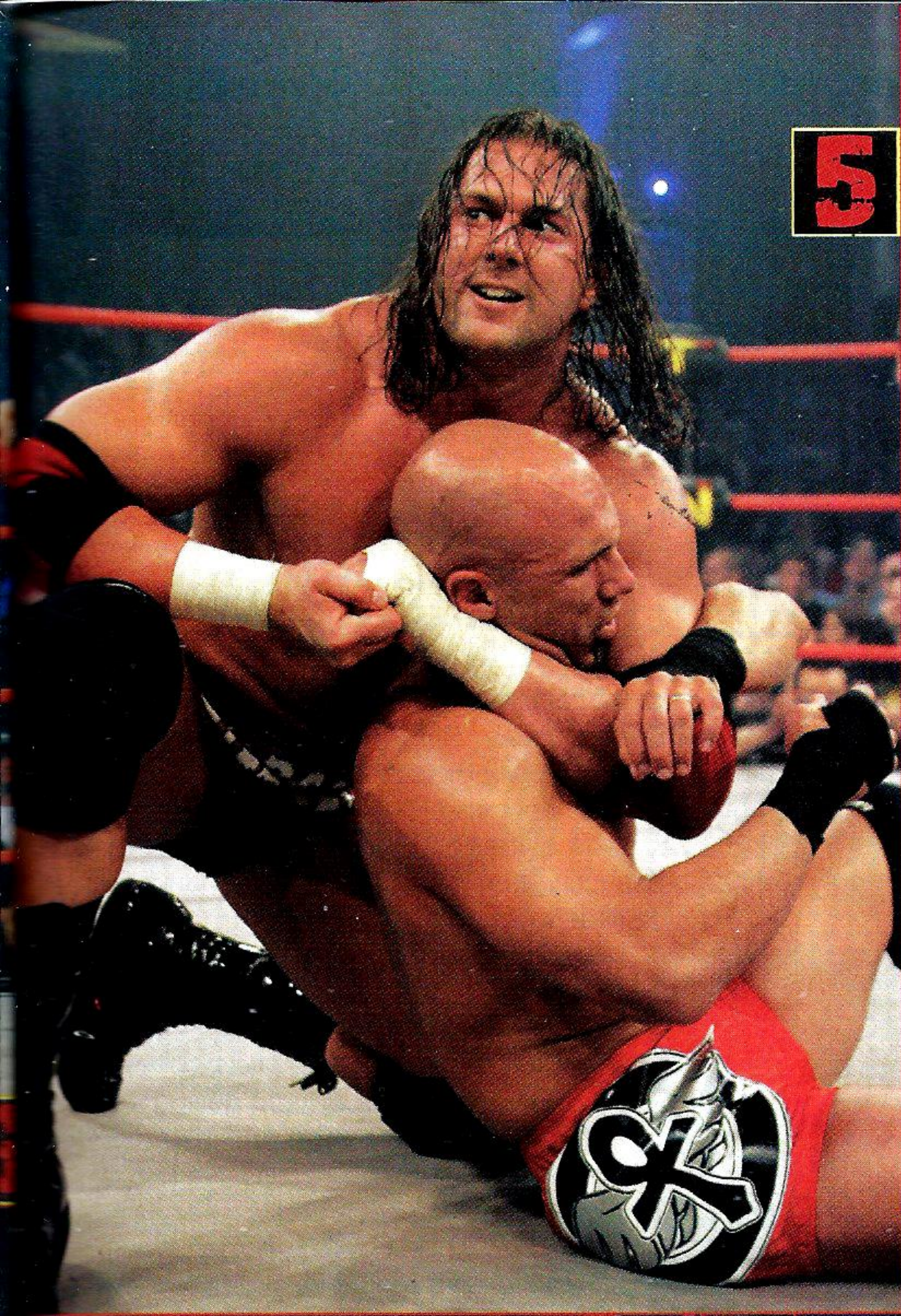
OVERALL VALUE: AMW likes nothing better than boasting about being the greatest tag team in wrestling. They may not necessarily be at that level yet, but they're closer now than they have ever been. They are the centerpieces of the TNA tag team division. They stuck with TNA even when they were rumored to have been heavily recruited by WWE. That loyalty and their continued improvement in the ring make them a valuable part of the TNA team. **GRADE: A-**



AMERICA'S
MOST WANTED







5

- 1** The lovely—and dangerous—Gail Kim has been a mainstay in the corner of AMW. Many a match has been won thanks to her “assistance.”
- 2** America’s Most Wanted shocked TNA fans everywhere when they announced their allegiance to Jeff Jarrett in 2005, yet the duo was never more successful than as rule-breakers.
- 3** The point came where AMW had so thoroughly dominated the tag ranks that teams were being pieced together with predominantly singles wrestlers to face the duo.
- 4** AMW’s dominance over the TNA tag team division was very impressive during the first half of 2006. Former champions, such as The Naturals, were no match for Chris Harris and James Storm.
- 5** Once again it appeared that AMW would dominate yet another high-profile team in the form of A.J. Styles and Christopher Daniels. However, the challengers proved to be too much for the champions, and AMW was without the NWA World tag title.
- 6** AMW did a short tour of duty with Jarrett’s Army in April. Despite the tandem’s best efforts, the Army fell to Sting’s contingent at Lockdown.

AMERICA'S MOST WANTED



4

KURT ANGLE

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Kurt Angle is one of the most decorated wrestlers of our generation and worthy of his Hall of Fame status. Realistically, Angle achieved all of his goals back in 2003 when he managed to overcome a career-threatening spinal injury to wrestle a classic match against Brock Lesnar in the main event of WrestleMania 19. Now that back and neck injuries have slowed him down, Angle should be content to work a part-time schedule similar to The Undertaker's and prepare for retirement. Instead, Angle revitalized Smackdown by jumping to Friday nights and winning the brand's World title back in January. He became Smackdown's unofficial MVP through May, and then stepped into the role of the fran-

chise player for the re-launched ECW. Angle is WWE's go-to guy, and he's the most consistent and reliable wrestler there is. **GRADE: A**

MARKETABILITY: Angle is one of the most universally respected wrestlers anywhere, and he usually has a strong fan base—even when he's wrestling as a rulebreaker. But now that Angle's in ECW, he has a new set of challenges. Some ECW fans think Angle's new no-nonsense, submission style is a perfect fit for Paul Heyman's "new vision" of ECW. But, other hardcore ECW fans still see Angle as a "WWE wrestler" whose presence waters down their beloved brand. Only time will tell if Angle can earn true acceptance from the ECW faithful. If the fans warm up to his mixed martial arts-influenced style and he proves himself to the ECW fan base, Angle's marketability will be better than ever. As of right now, it's still a question mark—especially if the ECW brand doesn't survive. **GRADE: B**

REPERTOIRE: Angle may have the most extensive repertoire of anyone ever to set foot inside a ring. He may rely on his pet holds such as the anklelock and Angle slam, but he has dozens and dozens of ways to win matches. Injuries are the only things that prevent him from earning a perfect score. **GRADE: A-**

CAREER GROWTH: Some people might view Angle's move to ECW as a step backward; we don't. In fact, we think it was a very gutsy move. ECW is a new world to conquer for a wrestler who's done everything else. It's also an opportunity for Angle to re-invent himself and his style. **GRADE: A+**

OVERALL VALUE: Priceless. Angle is WWE's most versatile competitor. Who else could have single-handedly changed the face of a brand, as Angle did when he jumped to Smackdown. WWE is clearly relying on the Olympic champion to do the same now for ECW. The day Angle finally hangs up the singlet for good will be a dark day for WWE—and for wrestling as a whole. **GRADE: A-**



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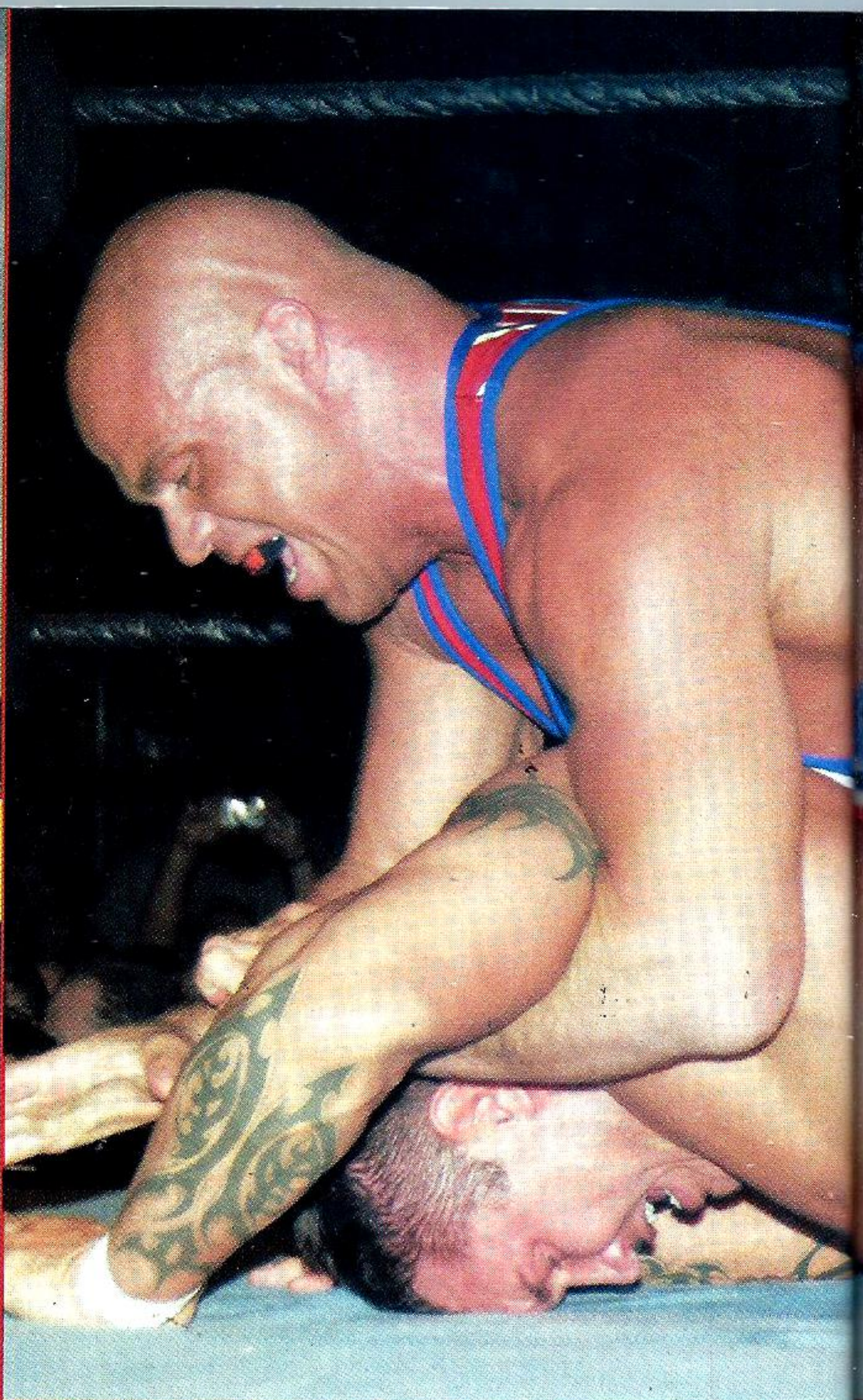
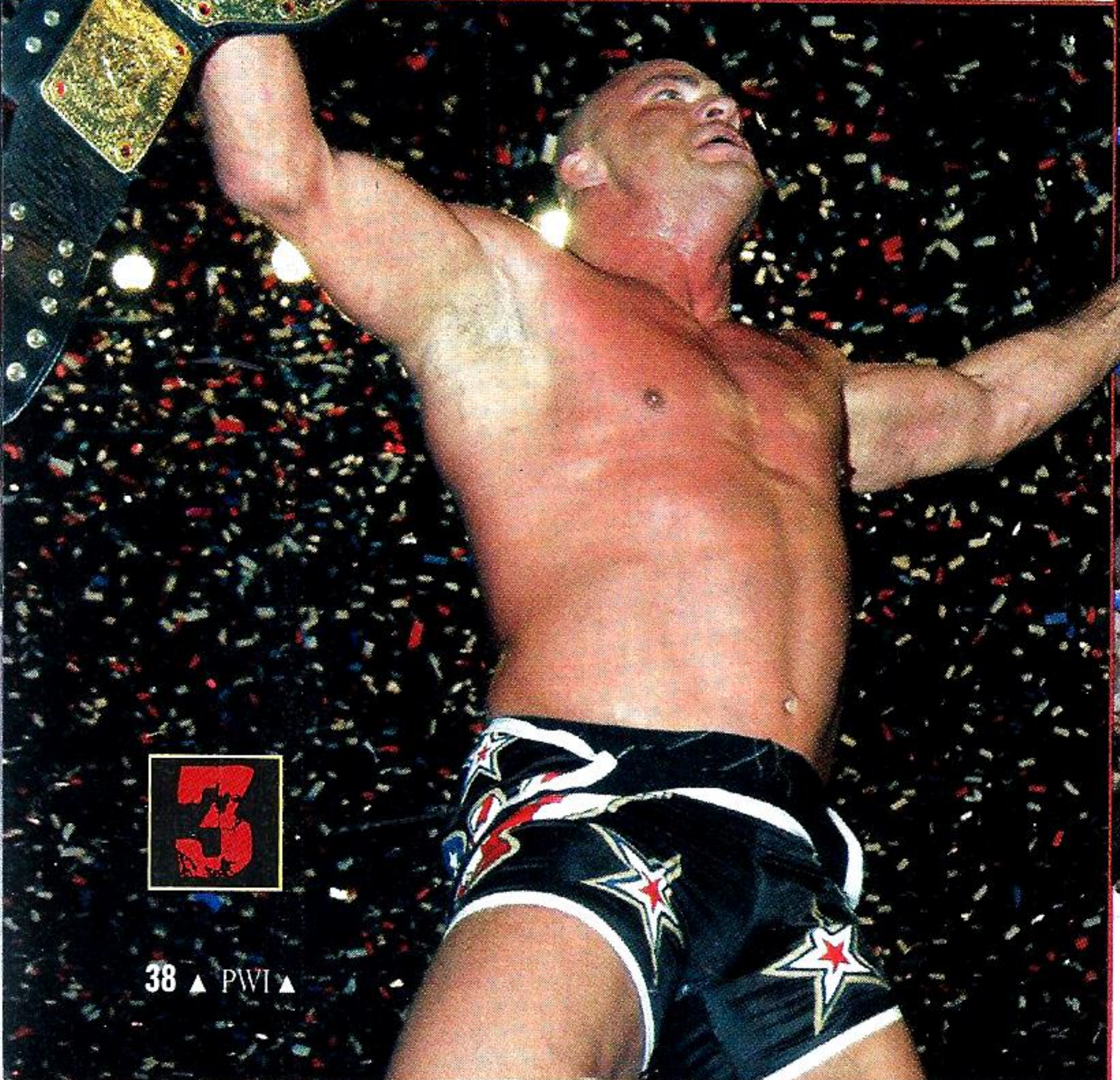
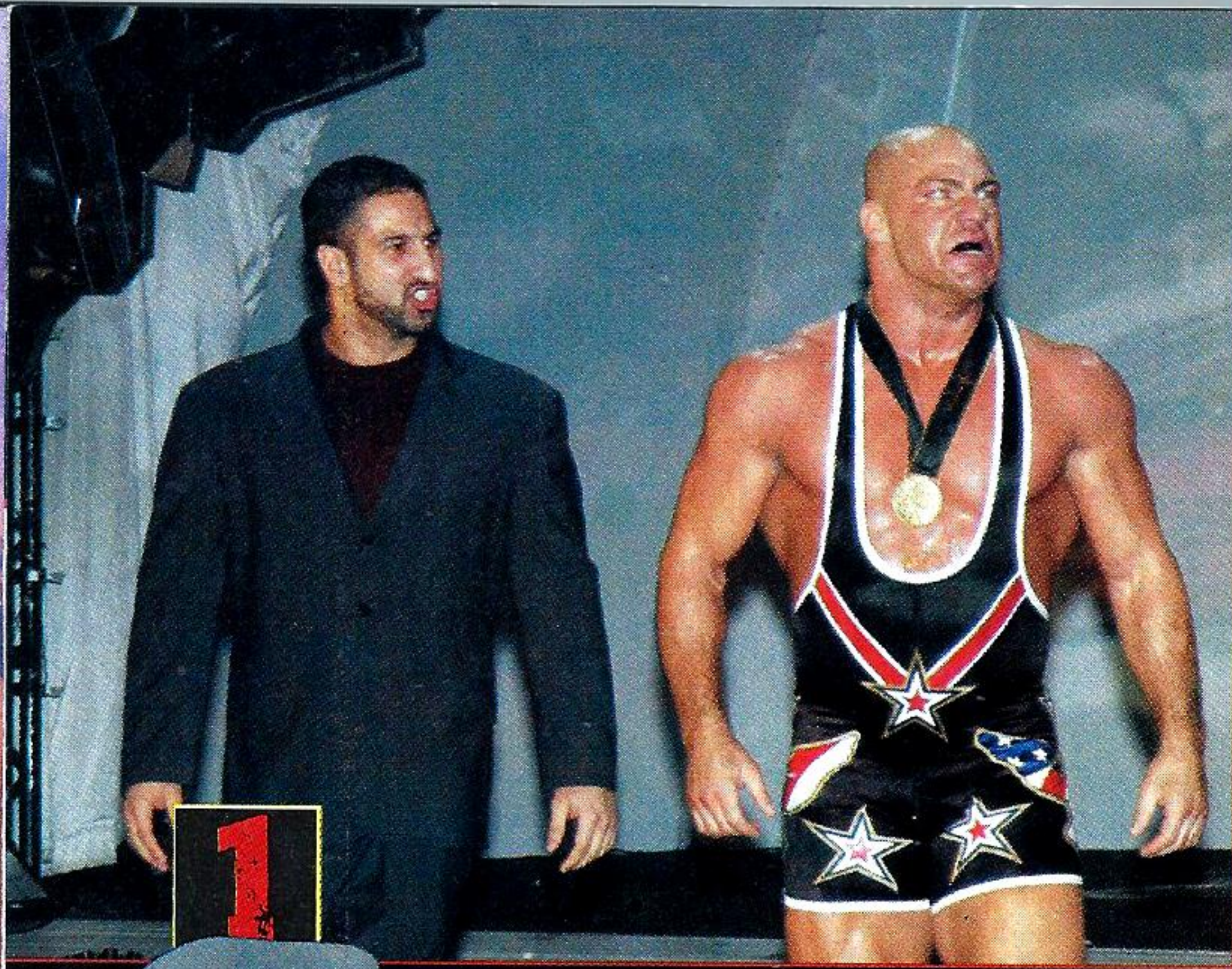
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KURT
ANGLE





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2

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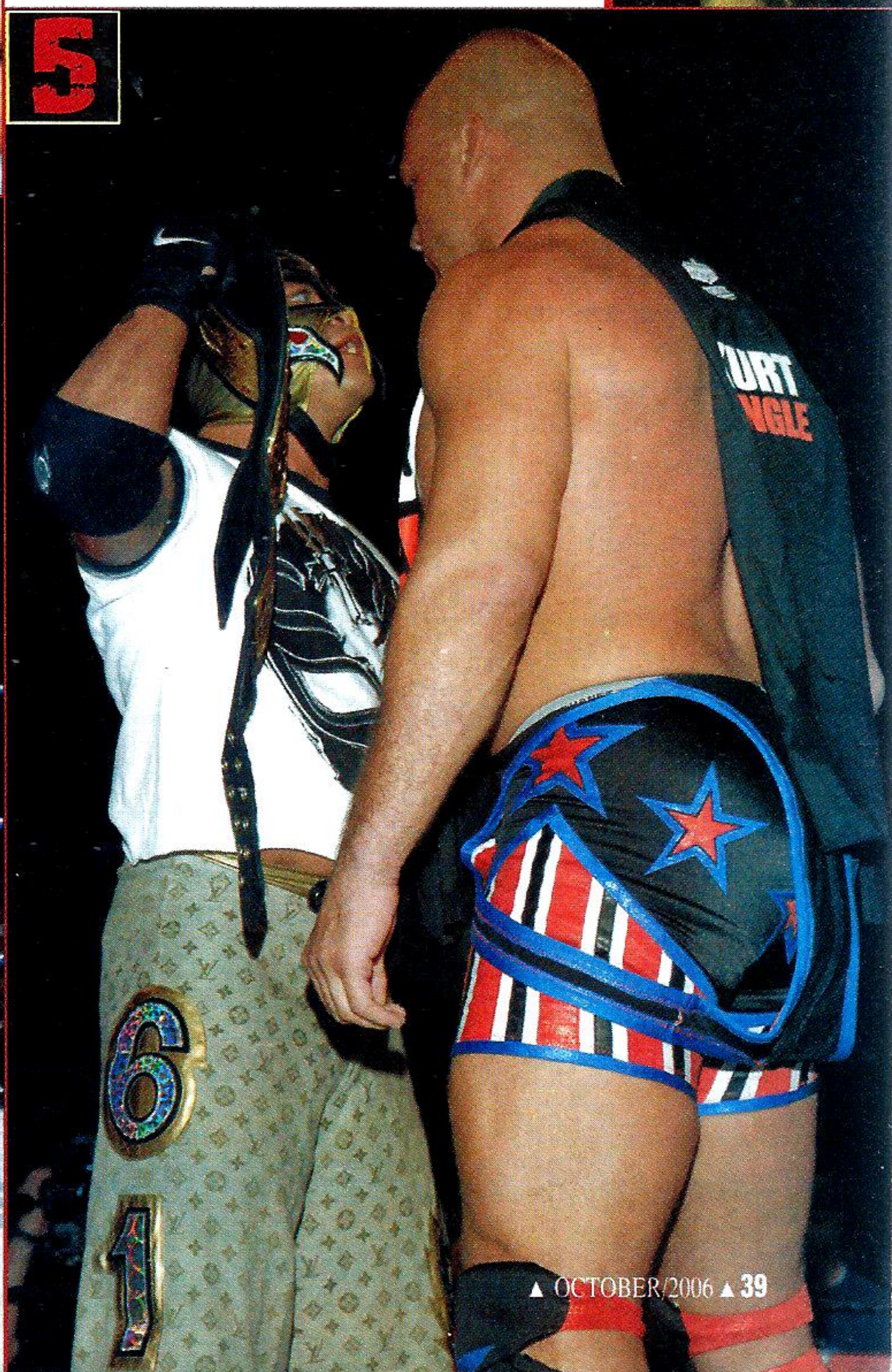


6



- 1** Angle aligned himself with the always controversial Daivari for the better portion of 2005. The crafty manager followed Angle to Smackdown in early 2006.
- 2** The gold medallist was able to get the best of his fellow 1996 Olympian, Mark Henry, during the 20-man battle royal to determine the Smackdown World champion.
- 3** The brief move to Smackdown pays off as Angle triumphantly celebrates his Smackdown World title victory in Philadelphia in January 2006.
- 4** Two of the all-time greats met up at Judgment Day 2006, with Angle getting the victory over The Undertaker in a well-contested, classically wrestled match.
- 5** Rey Mysterio Jr.'s shocking Smackdown World title victory at WrestleMania 22 impressed wrestling fans everywhere, as well as Kurt Angle, who became an instant rival with the diminutive champion.
- 6** Paul Heyman shocked the wrestling world when he drafted Kurt Angle to the new ECW. The former champion was immediately thrust into a feud with Raw's Randy Orton and the two met at ECW's One Night Stand II.

KURT ANGLE



CHRIS BENOIT

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Chris Benoit won one world title and it's like his competitive spirit just faded away. After losing the belt to Randy Orton at SummerSlam 2004, Benoit just dropped out of the title picture. When he was dealt to Smackdown, he contented himself with competing for the U.S. title instead of trying to push for that brand's championship. Now Benoit is taking Gunner Scott under his wing, and it seems like he's content with his lot as a Smackdown enforcer. "The Crippler" has downshifted his career objectives, and world championships don't seem as high on his list of priorities as they once were. That's not necessarily a bad thing (see "Career Growth"). **GRADE: B-**

MARKETABILITY: Benoit's marketability maxed out in 2004 when "Toothless Aggression" was all the rage in WWE. He still has a devoted following who see him as the personification of pure scientific wrestling in a promotion that all-too-frequently values showmanship and gimmickry over actual wrestling ability. He's not as hot a ticket as he was two years ago, but we can't see him ever dropping below a B in this category. **GRADE: B**

REPERTOIRE: And we don't ever see him dropping below an A in *this* category. Benoit has wrestled everywhere, including New Japan, Mexico, ECW, WCW, and WWE. He's made it a point of personal pride to learn something new everywhere he goes. Benoit is one of wrestling's elite masters. **GRADE: A+**

CAREER GROWTH: Benoit is at the stage where he has decided to put his energy into giving back to wrestling, and that's a great thing. Benoit still has some goals he wants to accomplish before he hangs up the boots, such as getting revenge on Mark Henry, facing old friend Dean Malenko in ECW, and helping youngsters like Scott make the transition from Ohio Valley into WWE. Those sorts of actions may not add more titles to Benoit's resume, but for a guy who had such a rough road into wrestling, it must give him personal satisfaction to help others navigate the same dangerous waters he did. Benoit has achieved a certain type of maturity. Sometimes that's more important than title belts. **GRADE: A**

OVERALL VALUE: Benoit is invaluable times three. He is an invaluable locker-room leader and resource to fresh-faced WWE newcomers. He is a proven main-event performer who can seamlessly be slipped into the world title matches and surpass all expectations. And he appeals to the segment of hardcore fans who care more about a wrestler's performance in the ring than about a flashy appearance and colorful interviews. **GRADE: A-**



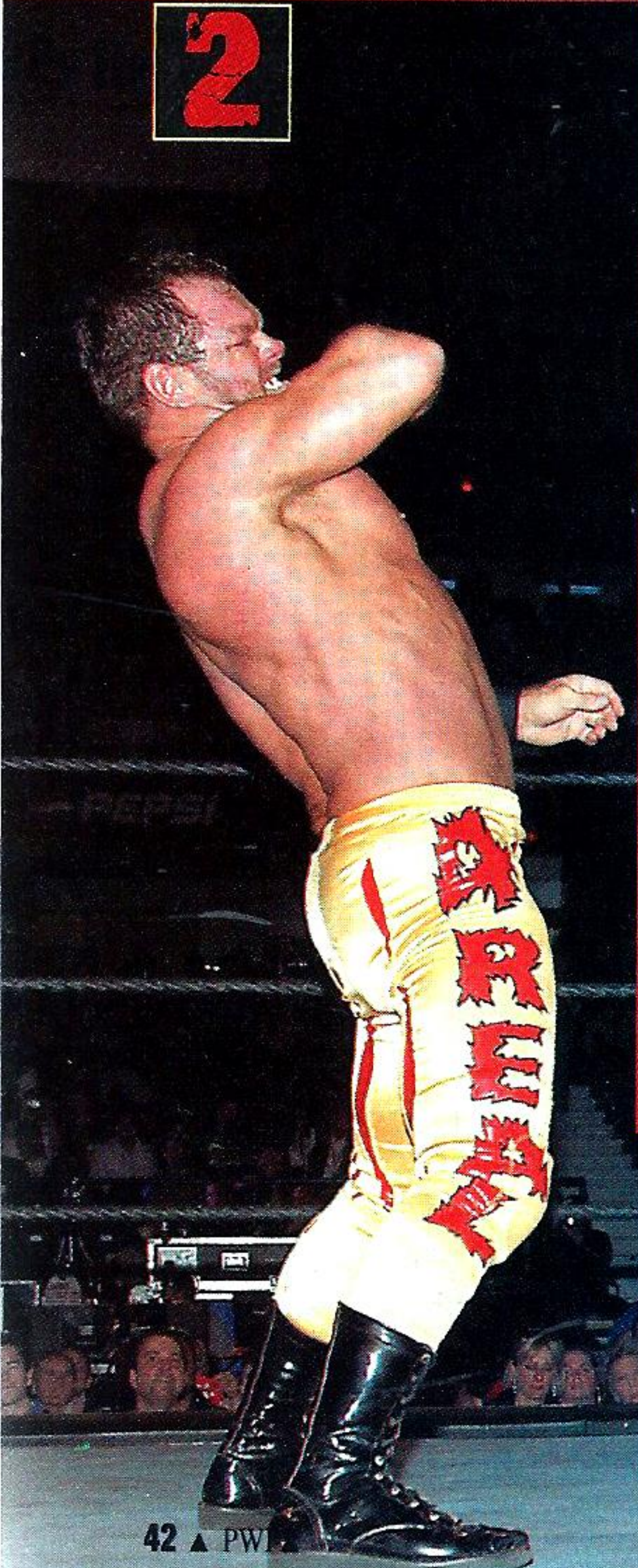
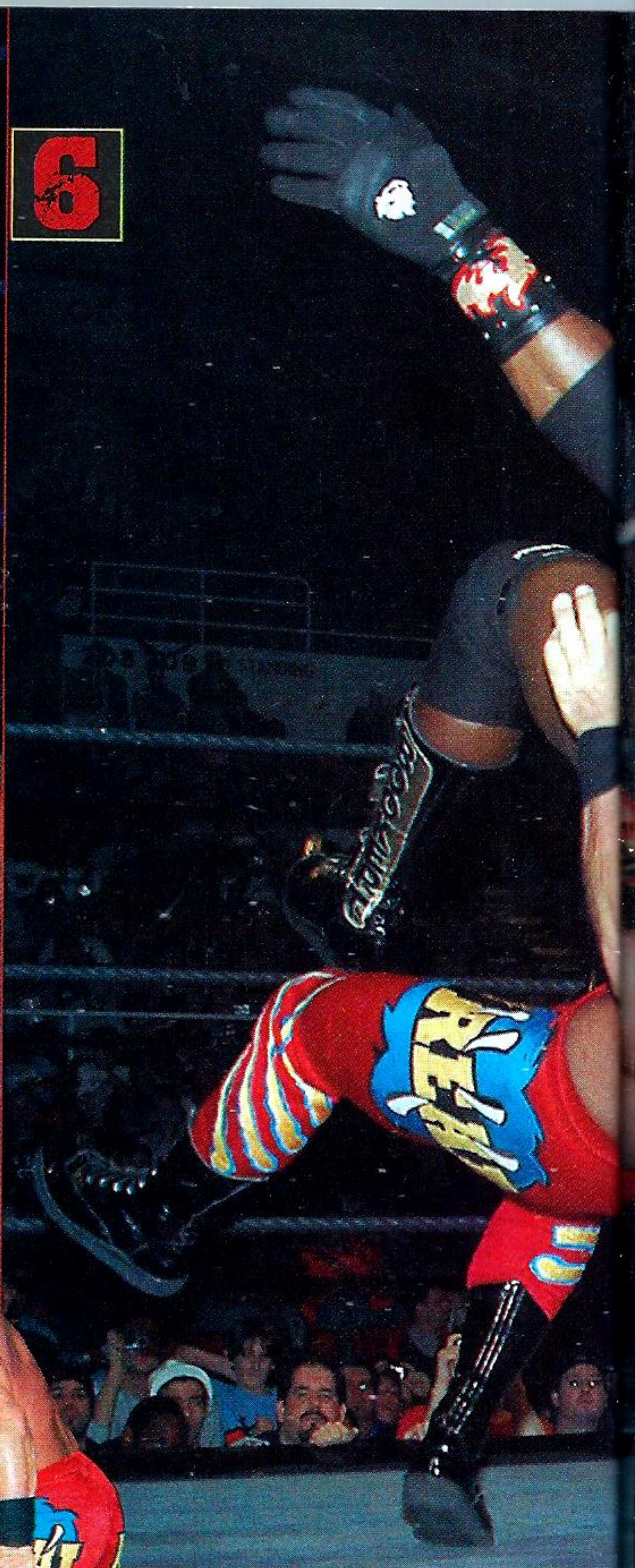
CHRIS
BENOIT



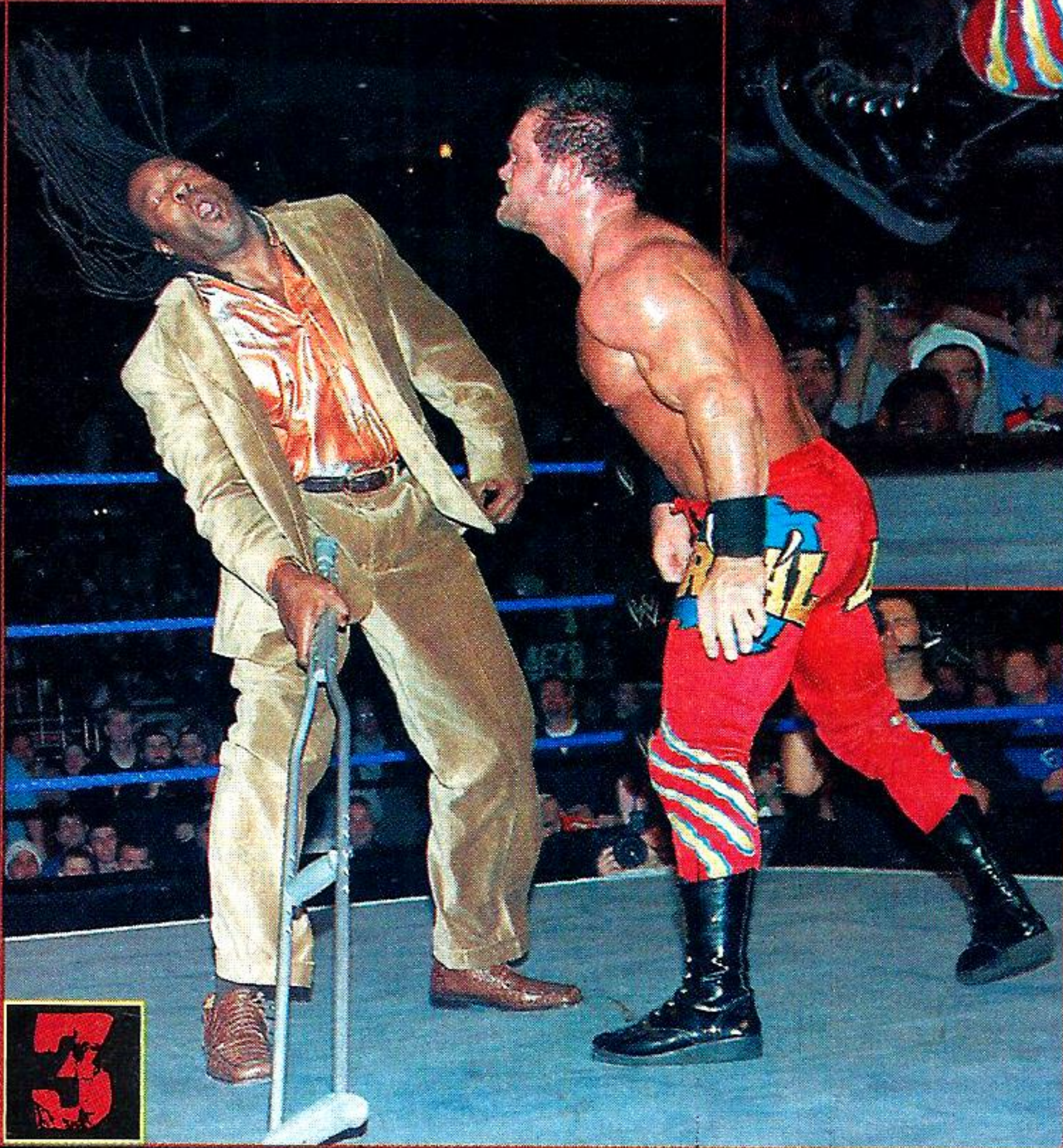


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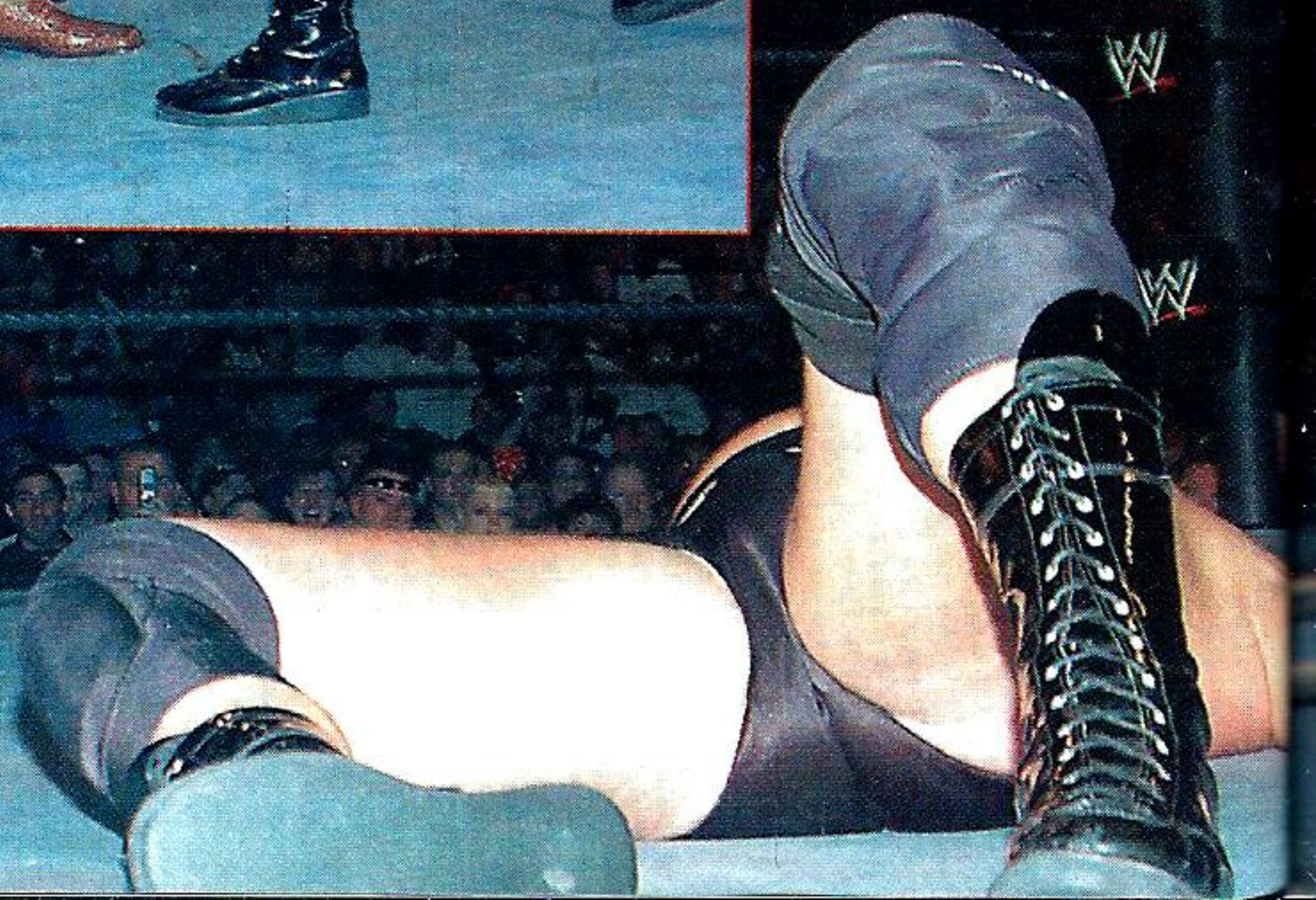
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2



3



CHRIS BENOIT

1 With Booker sidelined by injury, Randy Orton took over for him in the best-of-seven series. In the seventh and deciding match, Benoit seemed poised to finish off Orton for the title.

2 Benoit looked solid in his 'Mania match with JBL. However, it was the "Wrestling God" that walked out of the Allstate Arena with the U.S. title.

3 Benoit's U.S. title hopes were dashed when both Booker and Sharmell became involved in the seventh match. Orton stole the victory, and the title, for Booker.

4 During WrestleMania weekend, Benoit teamed with Chavo Guerrero and Rey Mysterio Jr. to induct Eddie Guerrero into the WWE Hall of Fame.

5 Prior to WrestleMania 22, Benoit was able to take the U.S. title from Booker T, only to land squarely in the crosshairs of John Bradshaw Layfield.

6 The Benoit-Booker rivalry, which began when the two competed in WCW, will doubtlessly be revived at some point in the future. Deep down, these two men actually have a great deal of respect for one another.



CHRISTIAN CAGE

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Christian Cage jumped out of the WWE mid-card and landed right in the middle of the NWA World title picture. Christian won the strap at Against All Odds, and it looked like he was the shot of adrenaline TNA needed. But, after four months on top, the excitement of having Cage as the NWA champion seemed to run out. While the fans rallied behind him as he was chasing Jeff Jarrett, they seemed to lose a little bit of interest after he actually won the title. Regardless, Cage's jump to TNA gave the company a major credibility boost and great publicity, as one of Vince Mc-

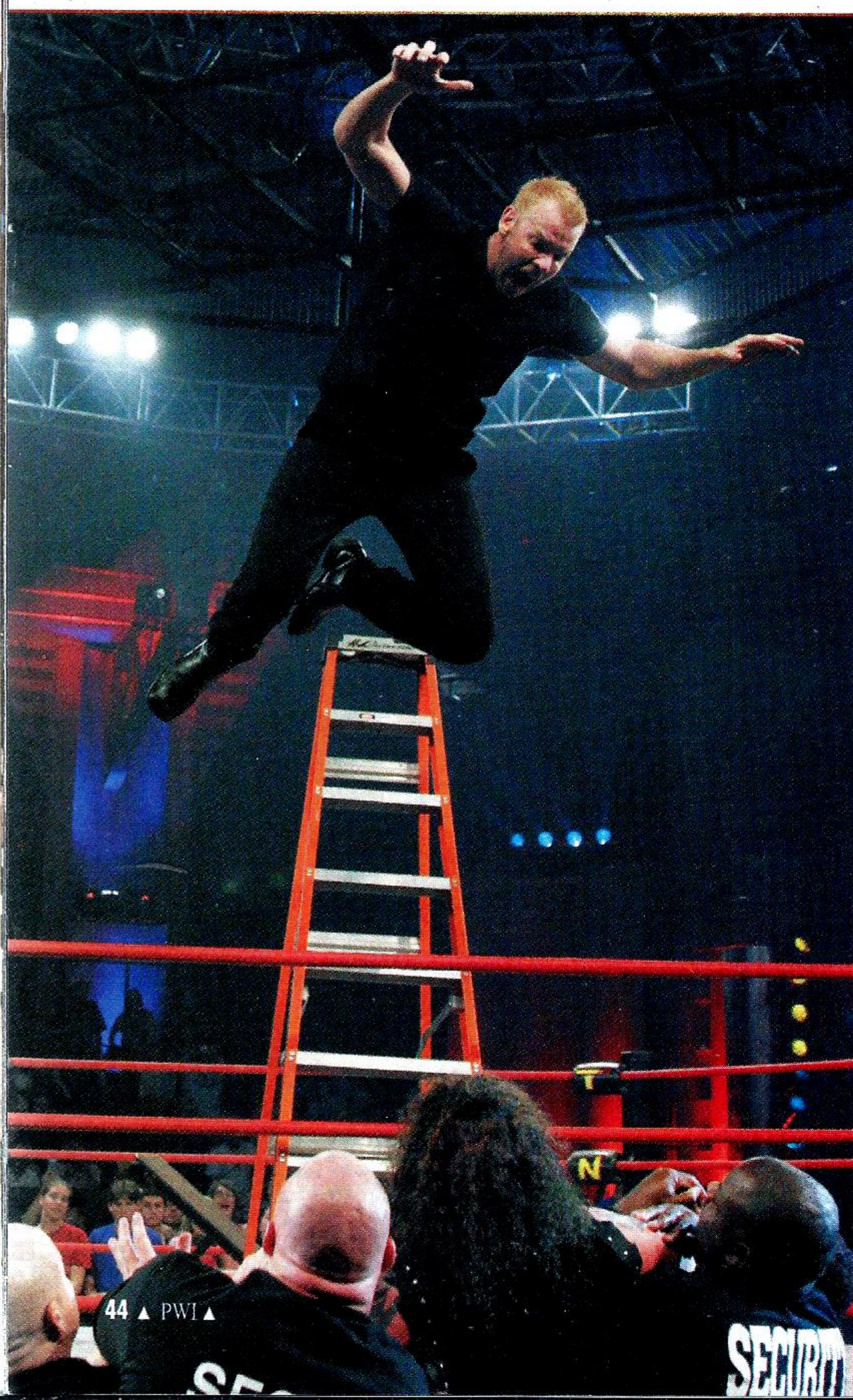
Mahon's wrestlers *actually* turned down a WWE contract in favor of TNA. Cage was TNA's top star for the first half of 2006, even if his star seems to have waned somewhat since. **GRADE: A**

MARKETABILITY: Cage still has plenty of peeps, as a cursory glance around TNA's Impact Zone will demonstrate. He has the hottest catchphrase—"That's how I roll"—and is one of the top T-shirt sellers. His years spent as a mid-card competitor in WWE have somewhat hurt his marketability, as a lot of fans still don't see him as a legitimate main-eventer. Still, even if he's not the most marketable guy in TNA, he's definitely in the top five. **GRADE: B+**

REPERTOIRE: Cage's "Unprettier" is a very effective finisher, but it's one of the riskiest moves in wrestling, primarily because it requires Cage to turn his back on his opponent before delivering the move. If an opponent can free an arm, he can do serious damage by punching Cage in the back of the head, applying a choke, or executing any number of moves that don't allow him a chance to brace himself for impact. Cage has paid the price a few times for attempting his signature move early, but he's also enough of an opportunist to recognize when other openings present themselves. He is quick to capitalize on cradles and fast roll-ups, as well as to slow down the pace of a match and catch his breath with an expertly applied basic armbar or keylock. **GRADE: B+**

CAREER GROWTH: Jumping to TNA was a gamble that paid off perfectly. Cage got a fresh start to his career and seems to be sincerely enjoying himself in TNA. A year ago, he was just as likely to be left off a WWE pay-per-view as he was to be a part of the show. Now he's at the top of TNA and wrestling better than ever. **GRADE: A**

OVERALL VALUE: Cage's success in TNA was noticed by everybody in WWE. His decision not to re-sign with WWE and to jump to TNA might have a lot of current WWE stars thinking about doing the same when their contracts run out. Cage also brought new fans to TNA as well as a hip, edgy feel to Orlando. He has been a great investment for the company. **GRADE: A-**



CHRISTIAN
CAGE



DON'T MISS

PWI UPDATE

WITH

FRANK INGIOSI

EXCLUSIVELY ON:
pwi-online.com

Pro Wrestling Illustrated Managing Editor Frank Ingiosi, is insightful, provocative, and downright funny! You've read "The Trade's Mark" in *PWI*. Now check out Frank's columns the morning after each *Raw*, *Impact*, and pay-per-view.

Ingiosi On Undertaker vs. Henry:

"The Undertaker looked great, hitting spot after spot and manhandling Henry as if he were a sack of potatoes (which, ironically, will rank three spots higher than Henry in this year's *PWI* 500.)"

Ingiosi On Joey Styles' Promo:

"Nothing was sacred, as Styles attacked some of the company's ridiculous storylines, as well as the chairman himself. Basically, for one beautiful three-minute span, Styles was the voice of every disgruntled fan."

Ingiosi On WWE Women:

"I hope something relatively interesting happens soon, because I'm actually getting tired of this weekly, mind-numbingly repetitive catfight between Mickie James, Ashley, and Trish. It's actually gotten to the point where it bores me both as a wrestling fan and as a man. Did I just write that?"

Frank Ingiosi ...
on pwi-online.com!

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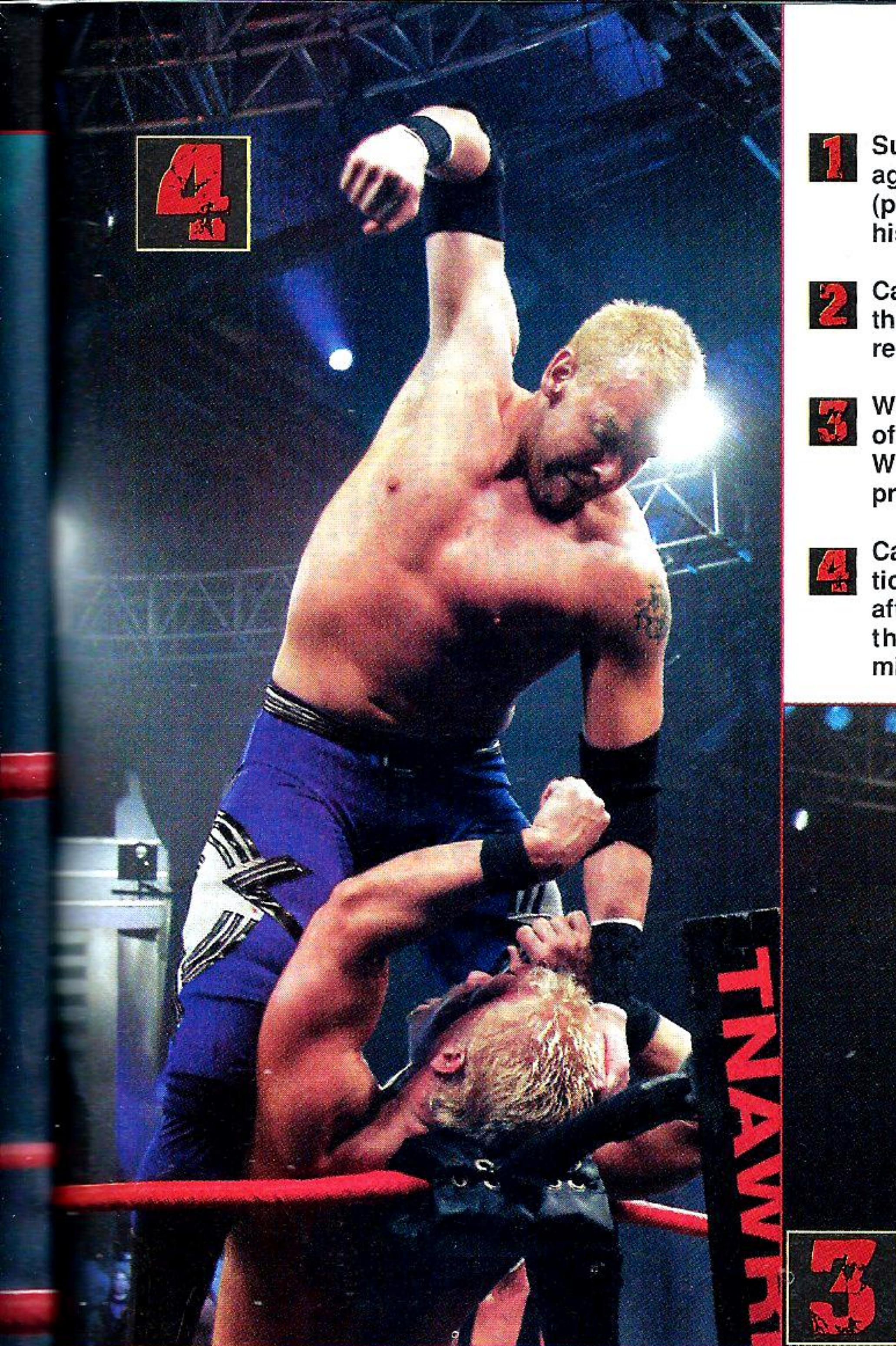
CHRISTIAN CAGE

1 Successfully defending his newly acquired title against a barrage of contenders, including Abyss (pictured), Cage eventually lost the strap back to his nemesis, Jarrett, in June.

2 Cage fought all of Jarrett's men, but couldn't keep the title. Chances are the feud will continue, per the request of haters of Jarrett's Army everywhere.

3 When Christian Cage splashed into TNA at the end of last year, he made wrestling history as the first WWE Superstar to choose an alternative televised promotion over re-signing with WWE.

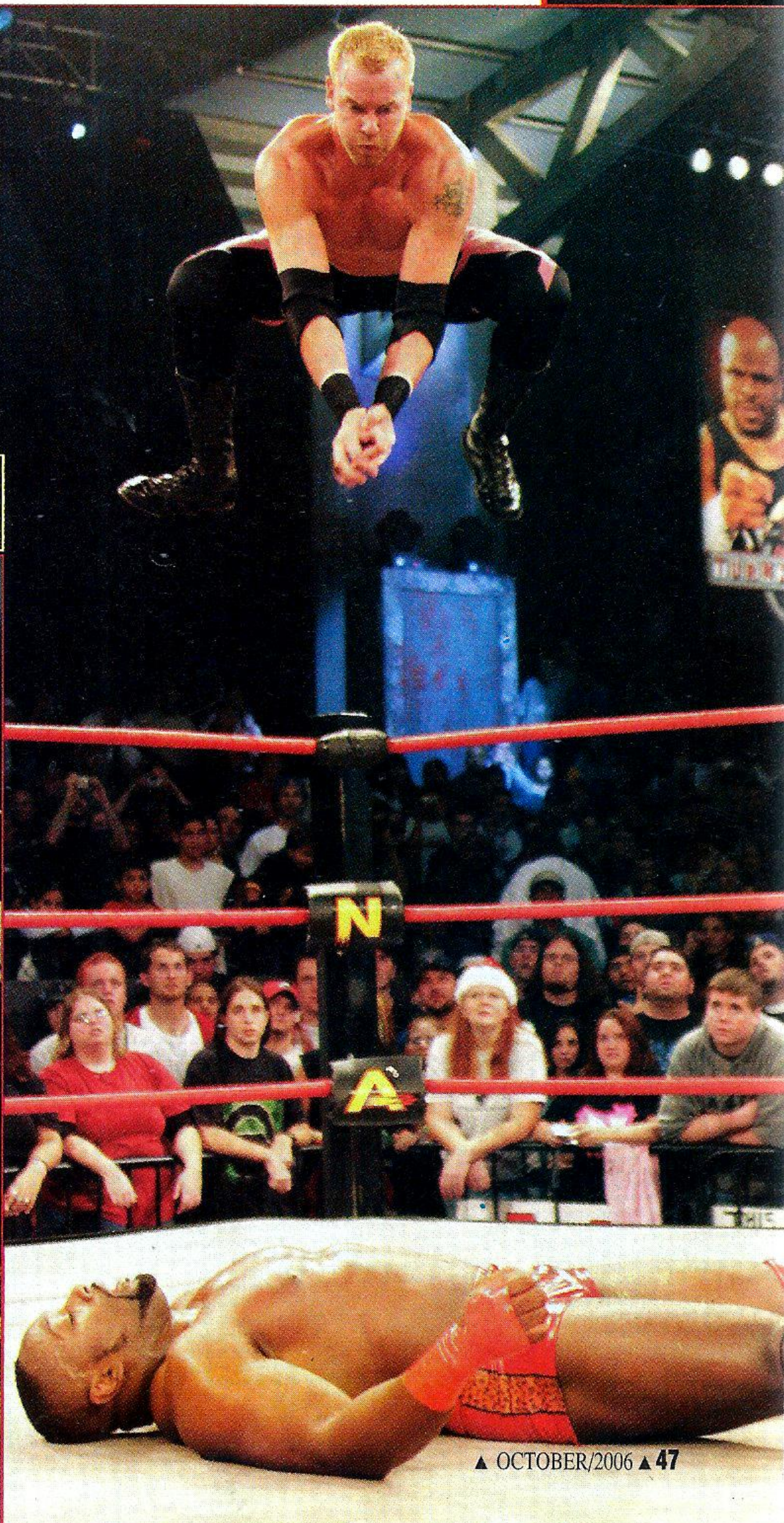
4 Cage has pounded back at Jarrett's menacing tactics, but, in the end, Jarrett was granted the title after it was declared vacant immediately following the "King Of The Mountain" match at Slam-miversary.



3



2



JOHN CENA

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Not since the heyday of "Die Rocky, Die" has a supposed fan favorite been such a lightning rod for vitriol and venom. But while The Rock fixed his popularity problems by turning against the fans and then allowing those fans to turn him back into a fan favorite down the road, Cena hasn't changed his style one bit. Instead, he regained the Raw World title from Edge, somehow managed to make Triple-H tap out at WrestleMania 22, and went to war with the forces of ECW. He has beaten the odds time and time again, and

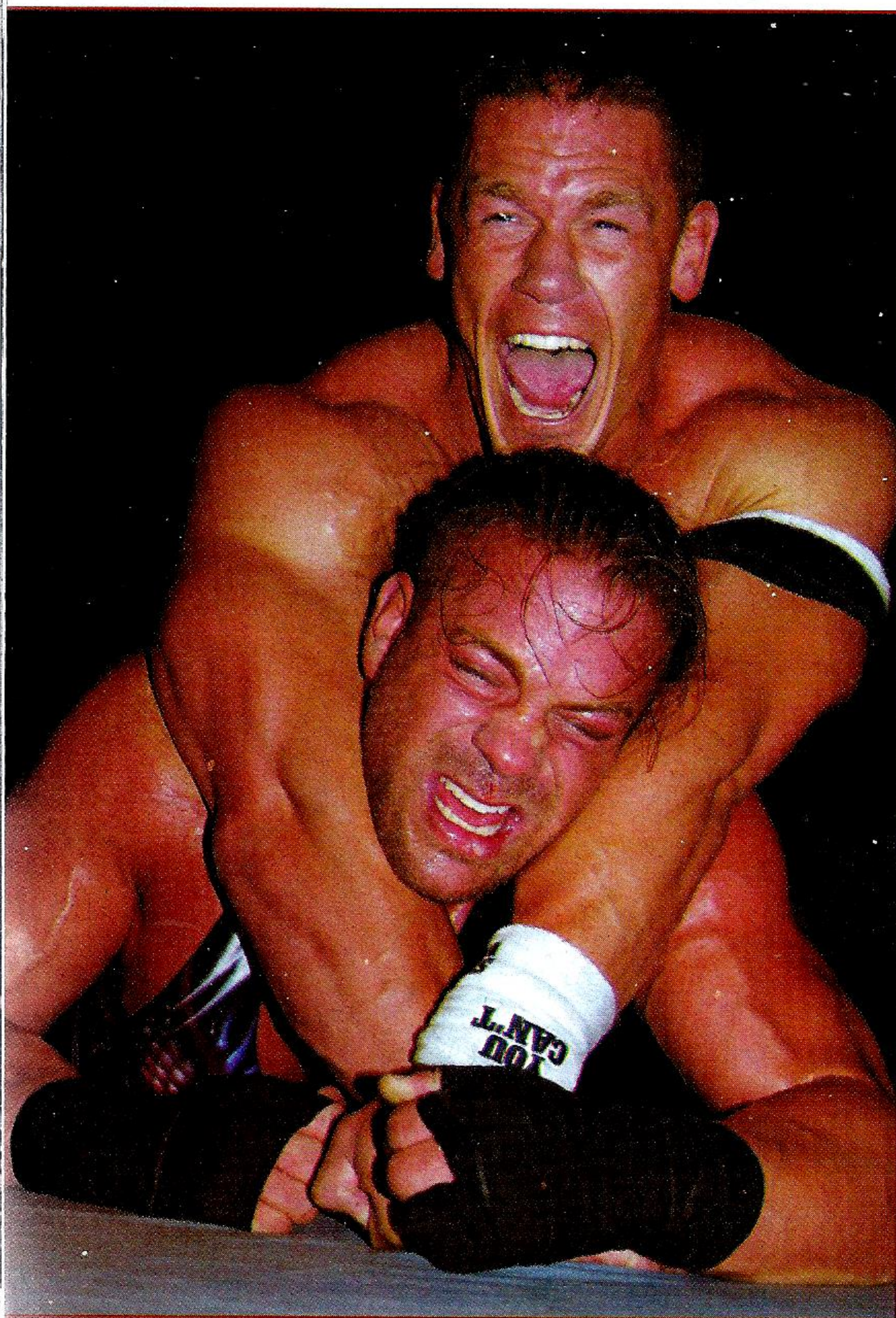
it looks like he has won back the respect of the fans. If not for a very controversial finish at One Night Stand, his grade would be perfect. **GRADE: A-**

MARKETABILITY: Take a look around any WWE arena and you're bound to see plenty of Cena merchandise. There are baseball caps, T-shirts, foam fingers—you name the product and there's probably a "Doctor Of Thuganomics" logo on it. With Cena's WWE Films debut, *The Marine*, on the horizon, and his popularity rebounding, he's unquestionably the most marketable wrestler in the U.S. today. **GRADE: A+**

REPERTOIRE: The fans in the Hammerstein Ballroom may have made their point in more obscene terms, but their message was loud and clear: Cena's offense is very limited. Adding the STFU last year was a big step in the right direction, but Cena still needs more. The five knuckle shuffle is tired and the FU is really just a glorified body-slam. If he truly wants to be accepted as an elite wrestler, Cena needs to add more to his arsenal. Otherwise, he's always going to hear chants of "You can't wrestle" ... and worse. **GRADE: C+**

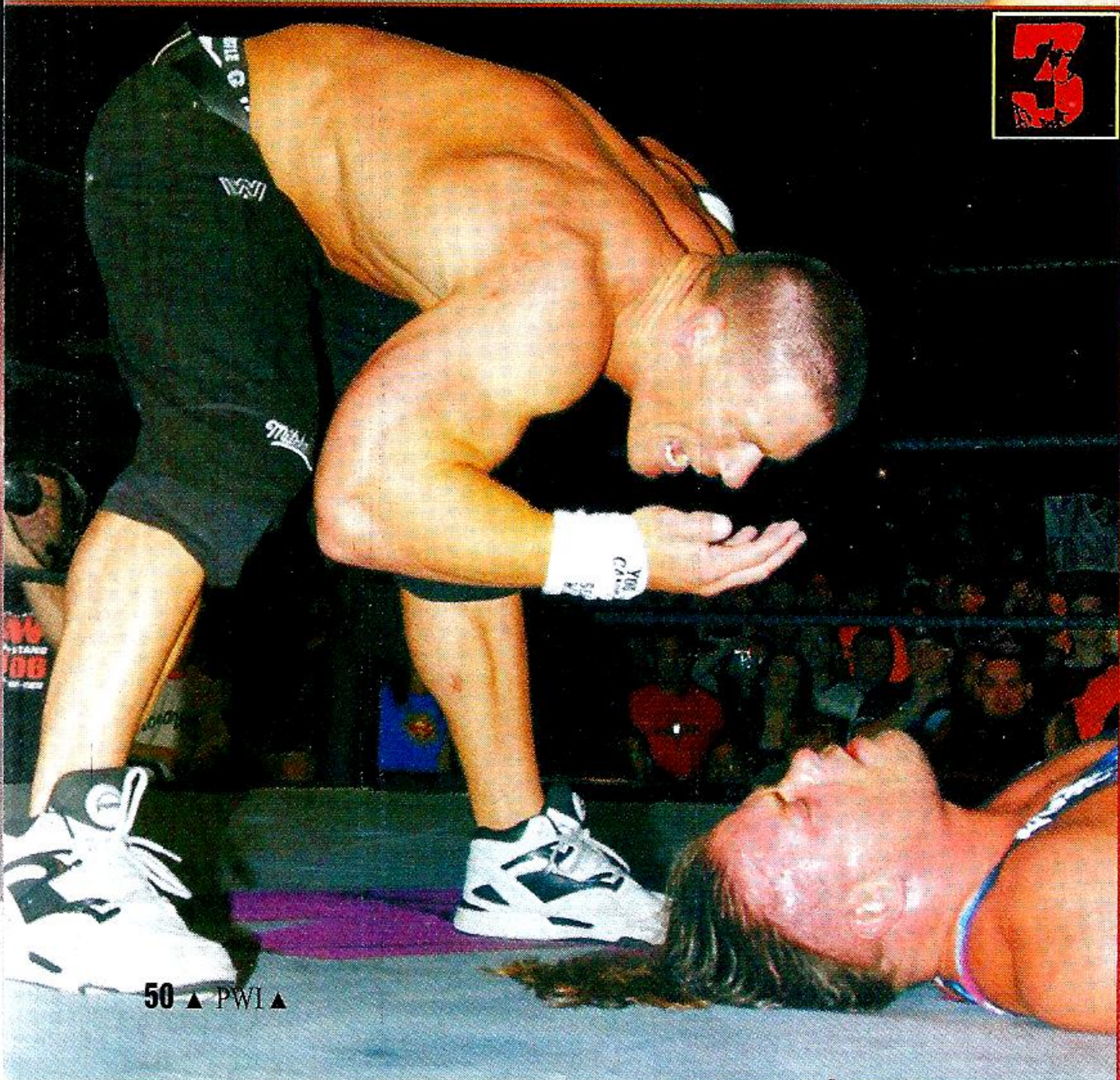
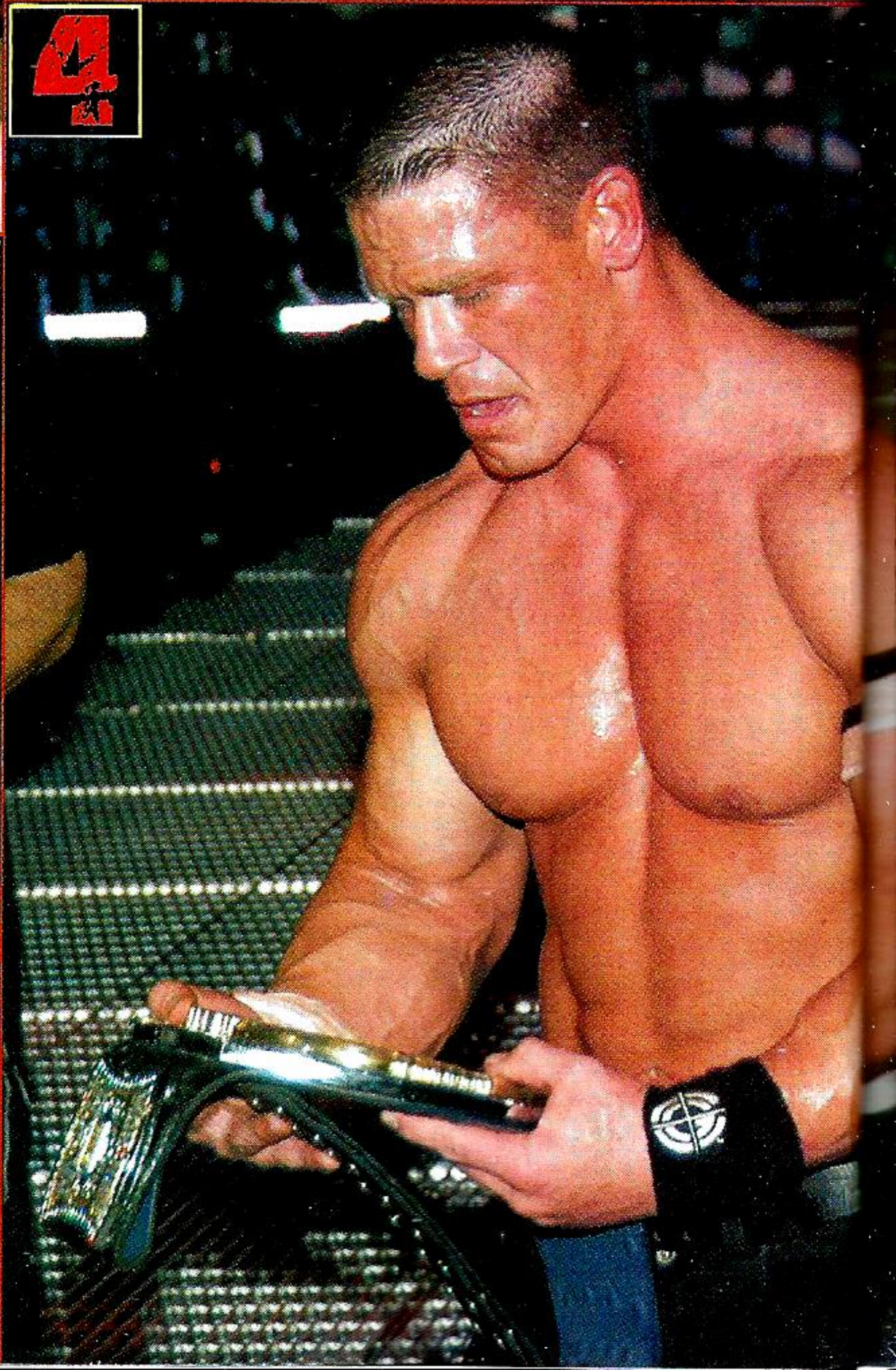
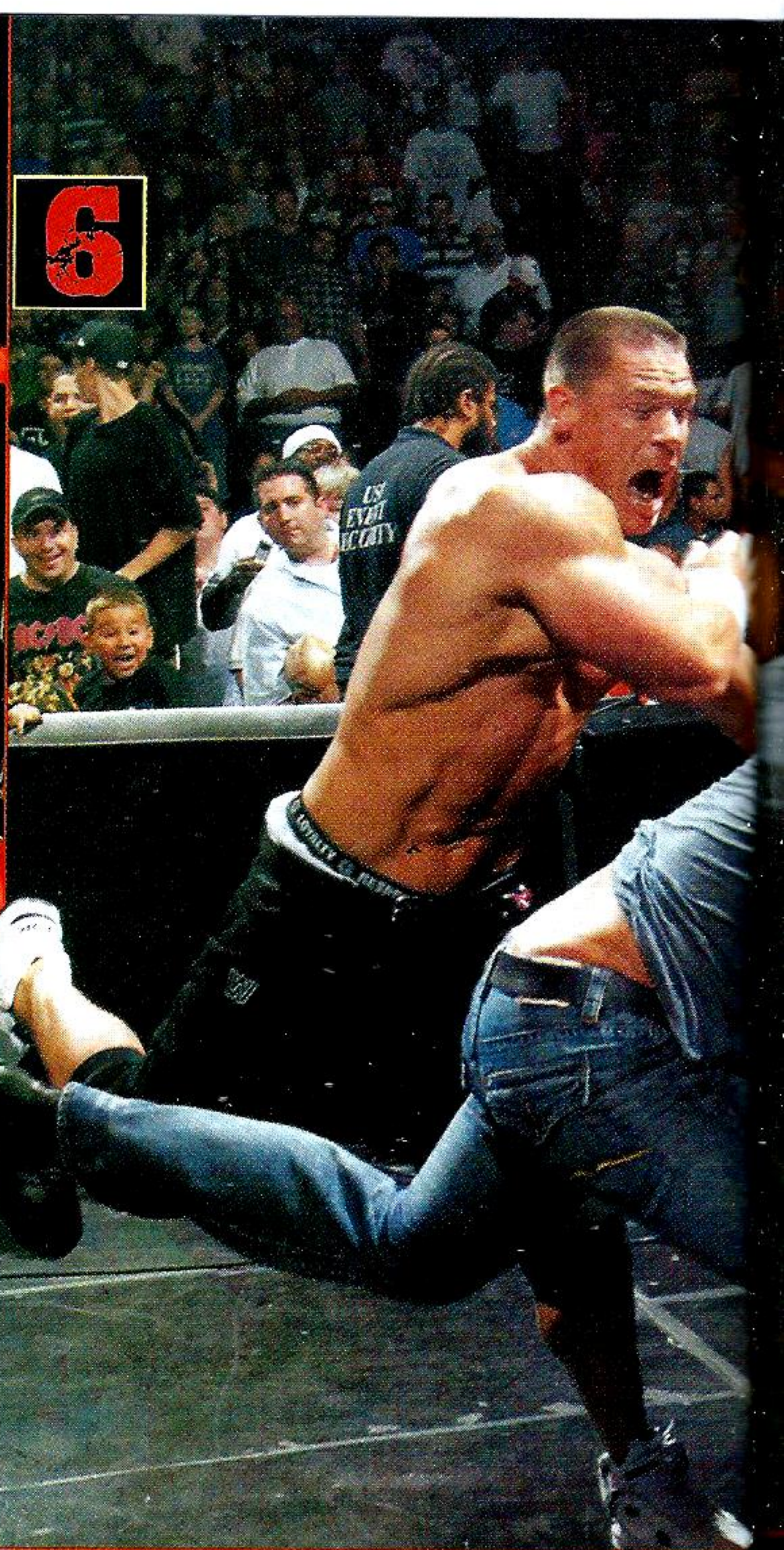
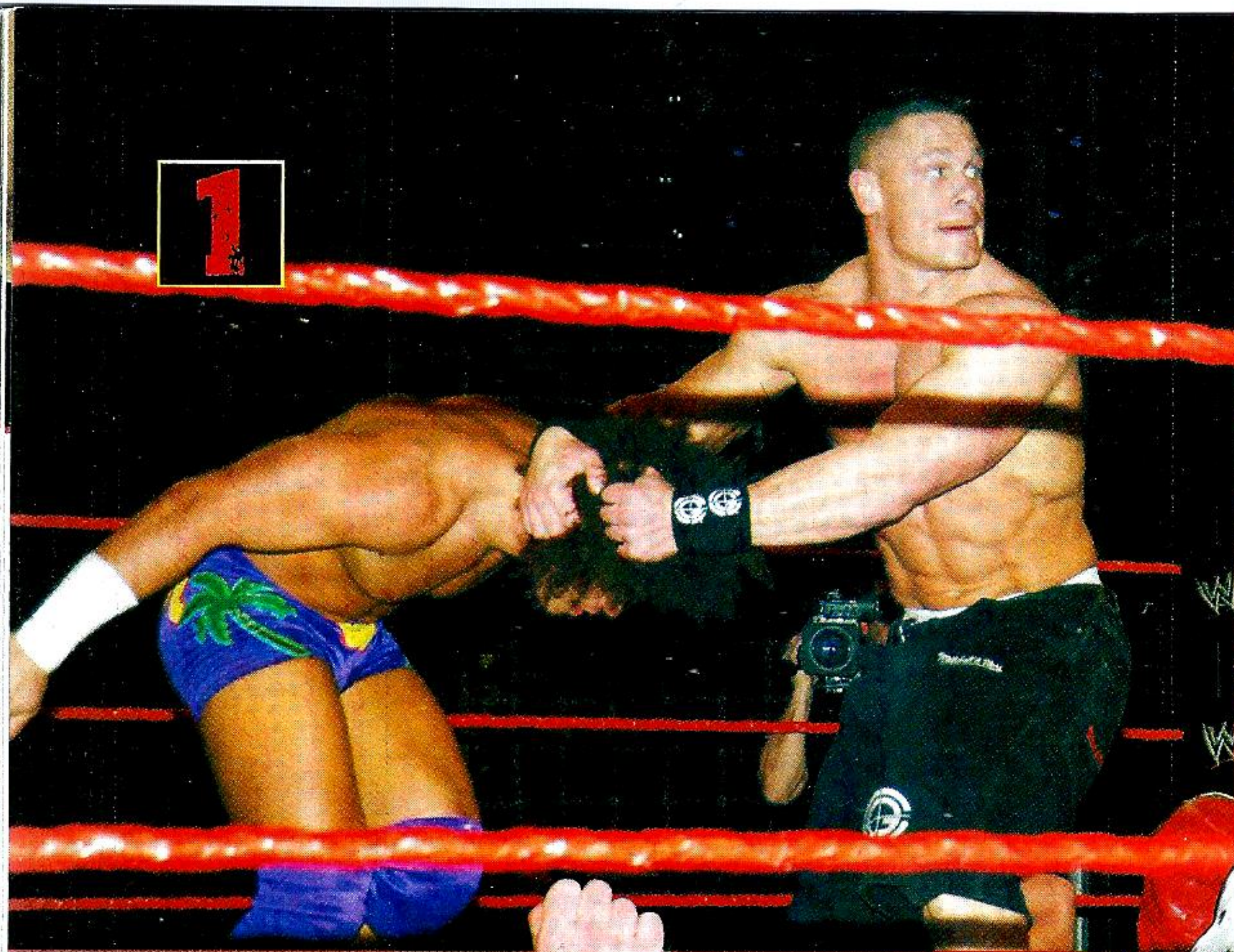
CAREER GROWTH: Last year at this time, everyone figured that Cena was just holding the Raw World title until Triple-H came back to claim it at WrestleMania. Heck, Hunter actually came out and said as much a few weeks before 'Mania. Instead, Cena has overcome a huge backlash from the fans and has established himself as the man to beat on the Raw brand. Cena is now the yardstick by which everyone else is compared, and not just a flash-in-the-pan wannabe rapper. **GRADE: A**

OVERALL VALUE: It would have been easy for the WWE front office to get cold feet when their heavily pushed champion began getting booed out of buildings in early-2006. Instead, they showed confidence in Cena and kept him in the main-event picture, even after he lost the title at New Year's Revolution. Cena responded by regaining the title and walking out of 'Mania with his championship intact. He may not be a Rock or an Austin, but Cena is getting better and better, and he's positioned to be WWE's flag-bearer for the foreseeable future. **GRADE: A-**



JOHN
CENA





JOHN CENA



1 The odds were stacked against John Cena during the "Elimination Chamber" match earlier this year at New Year's Revolution. Still, the fighting champion pulled through and retained the strap.

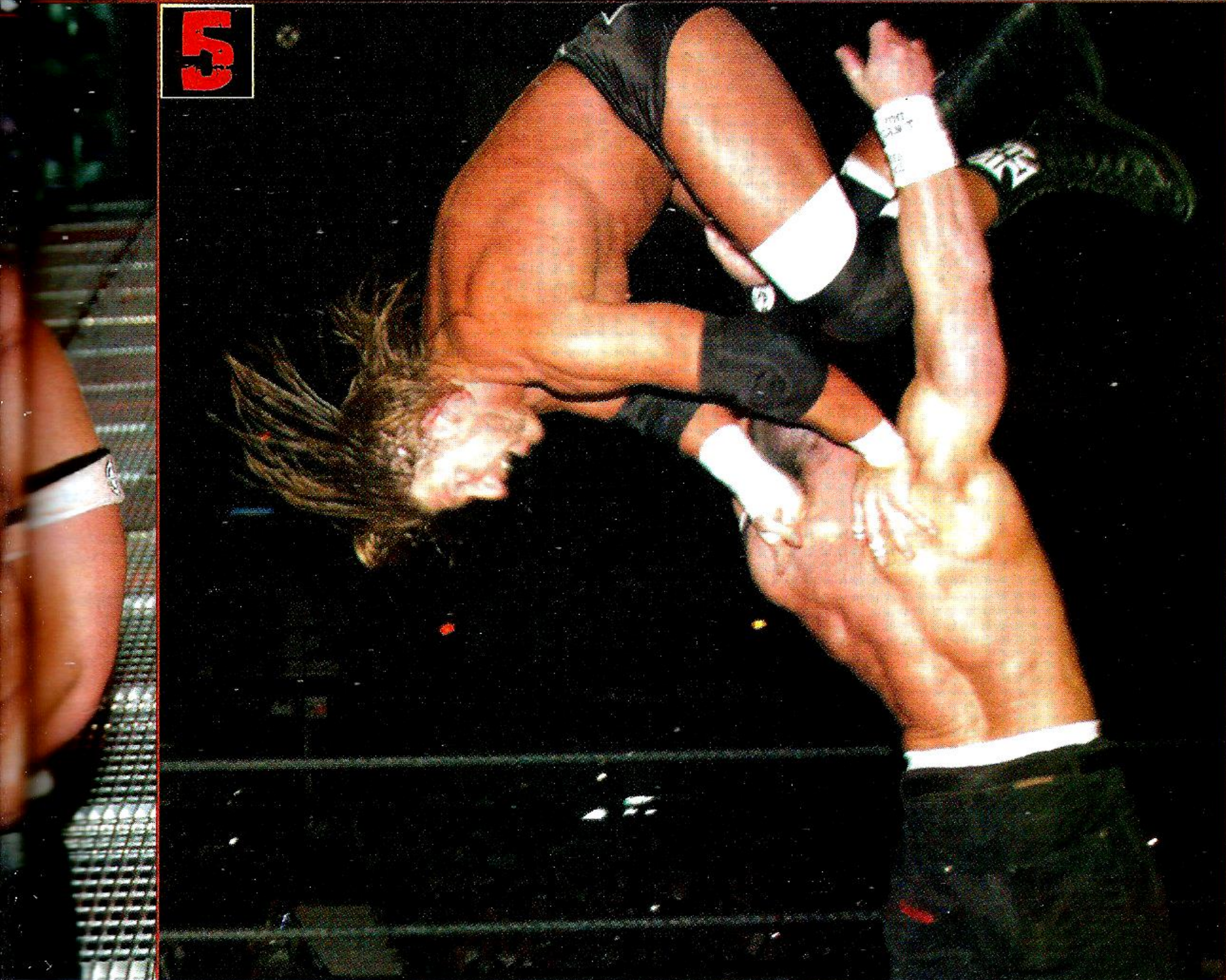
2 Unfortunately for Cena, Edge chose to cash in his money-in-the-bank immediately following the hellacious "Elimination Chamber" match. Although he fought valiantly, Cena would drop the title to the "Rated R Superstar."

3 Perhaps the greatest challenge of Cena's career came in front of a vicious pro-ECW crowd at One Night Stand II. Challenger Rob Van Dam would get the best of Cena that night—with some help from Edge and Paul Heyman.

4 Cena's hard-fought victories over Edge and Triple-H and his impressive title reign helped the embattled Superstar gain the respect of a growingly hostile fan base.

5 After regaining the title at the Royal Rumble, Cena squared off in a bitter feud with Triple-H. The champion was able to stave off "The Game" with an impressive win at WrestleMania 22.

6 The relentless Cena showed he was willing to do whatever it took to regain the Raw World title, including show up on ECW programming to exact some revenge on Edge.



5

BRYAN DANIELSON

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: The American Dragon restored stability to the Ring of Honor title by beating James Gibson for the strap back in September 2005 and successfully defending it ever since. Bryan Danielson has increased the prestige of that championship by defending the title against a wide variety of contenders and even facing off against Combat Zone Wrestling competitors like Chris Hero. Danielson may be the most successful wrestler in the U.S. not currently competing in either TNA or WWE. His goal was to become a fighting ROH champion, and he has succeeded. **GRADE: A**

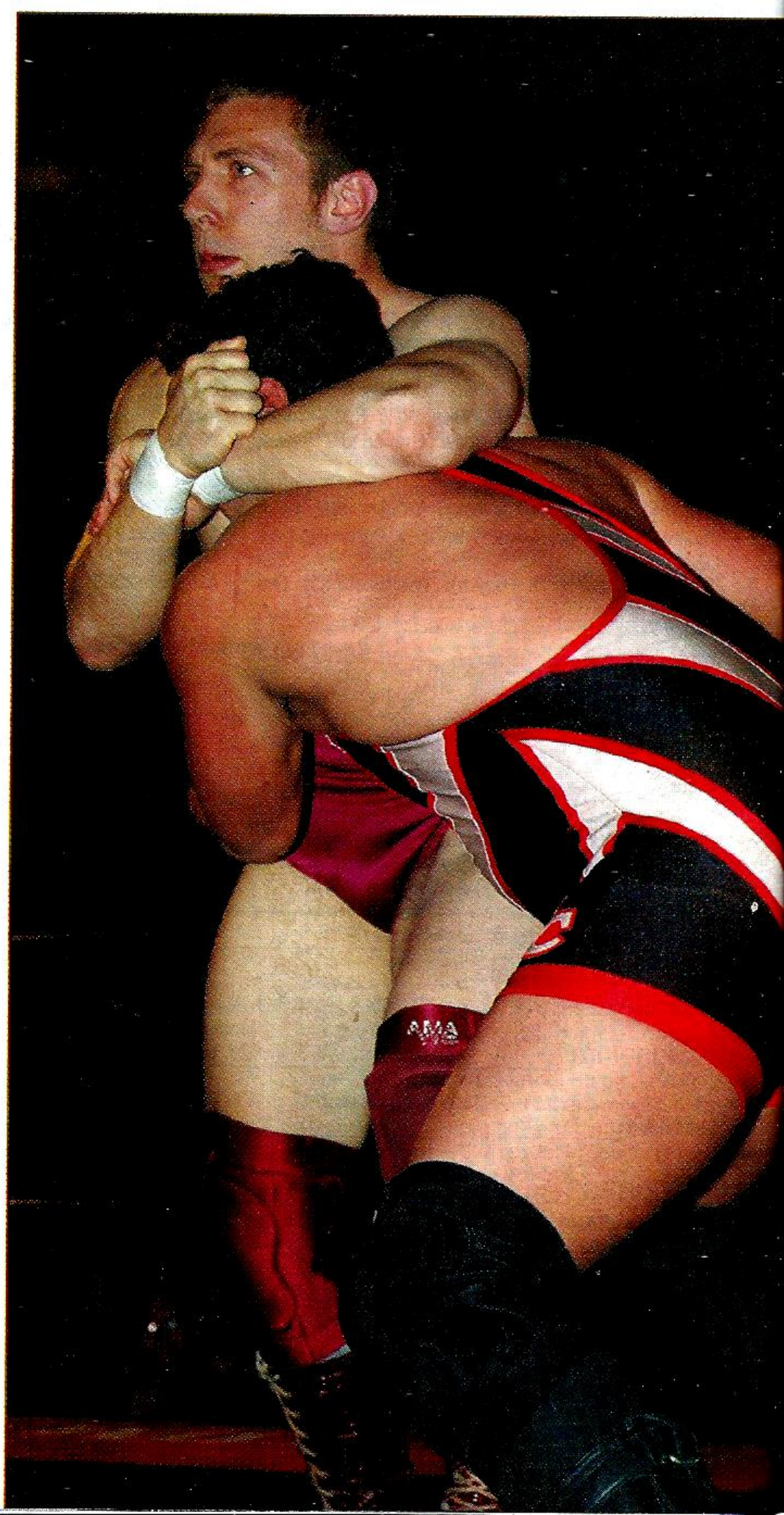
MARKETABILITY: Not to take anything away from Danielson's in-ring skills (we address those in full in the next category), but he could really use some sizzle to add to that steak. With his burgundy tights and sandy hair, he looks like a modern-day version of Bob Backlund. Danielson would probably take that as a compliment. But if straightforward, "by-the-book" wrestling purists were marketable, then NCAA, Greco-Roman, and freestyle wrestlers would be household names. How many of them can *you* name? Danielson could use an image consultant to improve his marketability. **GRADE: C**

REPERTOIRE: Danielson is unique in that he makes a conscious effort to win each match in a different way whenever possible. He's just as likely to end a match with his cattle mutilation submission lock as he is to employ his dragon suplex, cobra clutch crossface, double wrist clutch Indian deathlock, or one of a dozen other moves. If Danielson were forced to use an entirely different moveset in every match for an entire year, he could probably pull it off. Only Ric Flair, Kurt Angle, and Christopher Daniels might possibly be able to do the same. **GRADE: A+**

CAREER GROWTH: Danielson chased the ROH title for some time, and he finally managed to capture it. Patience is a rare virtue in the wrestling business. Danielson signed a WWE developmental deal back in 1999. When a WWE career didn't work out right away, he recommitted himself to improving his game by facing the top competition he could find on the independent circuit and internationally. He has improved steadily through those years and now is one of the premier technicians in the U.S. He may not be cashing those big WWE paychecks (yet), but he has improved

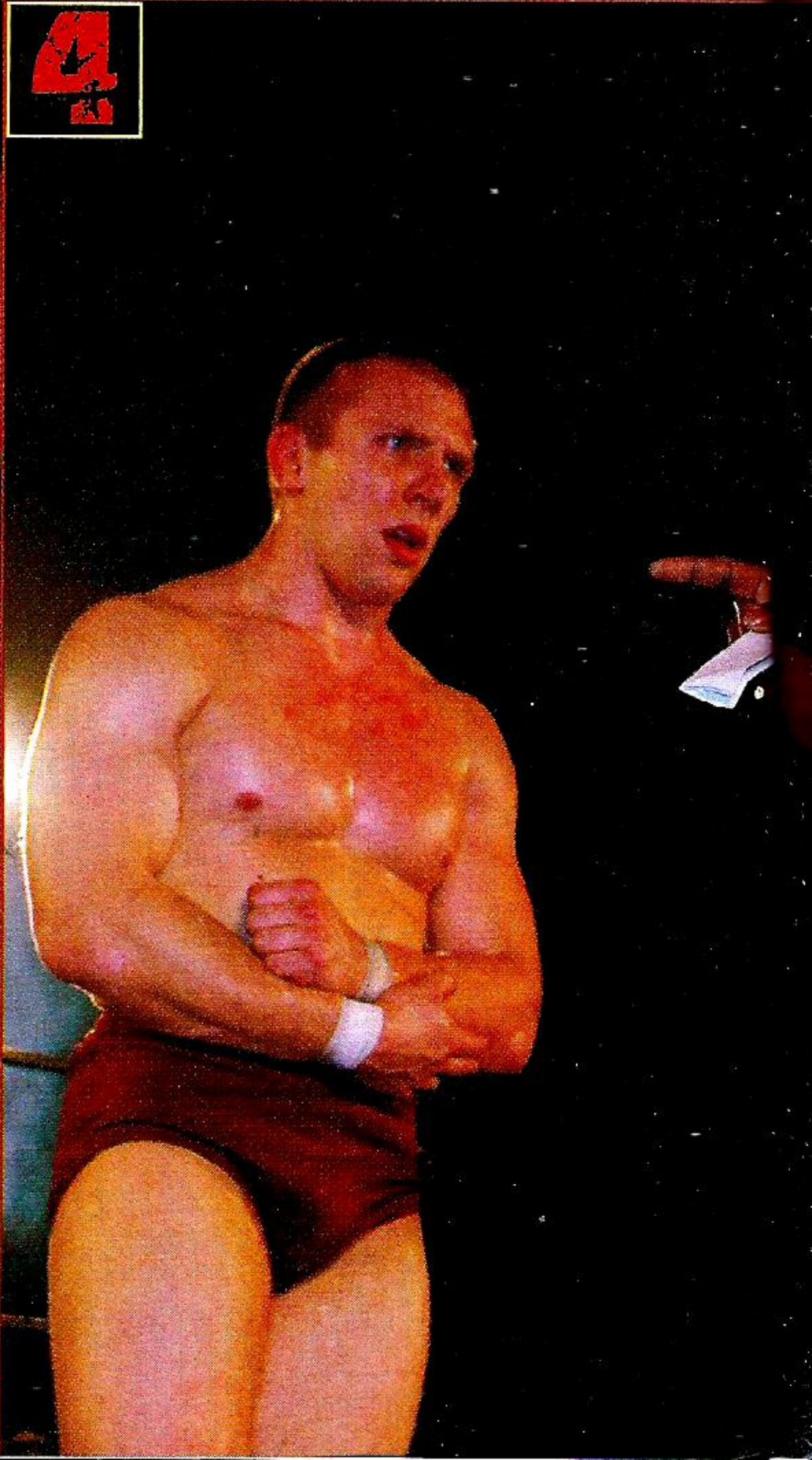
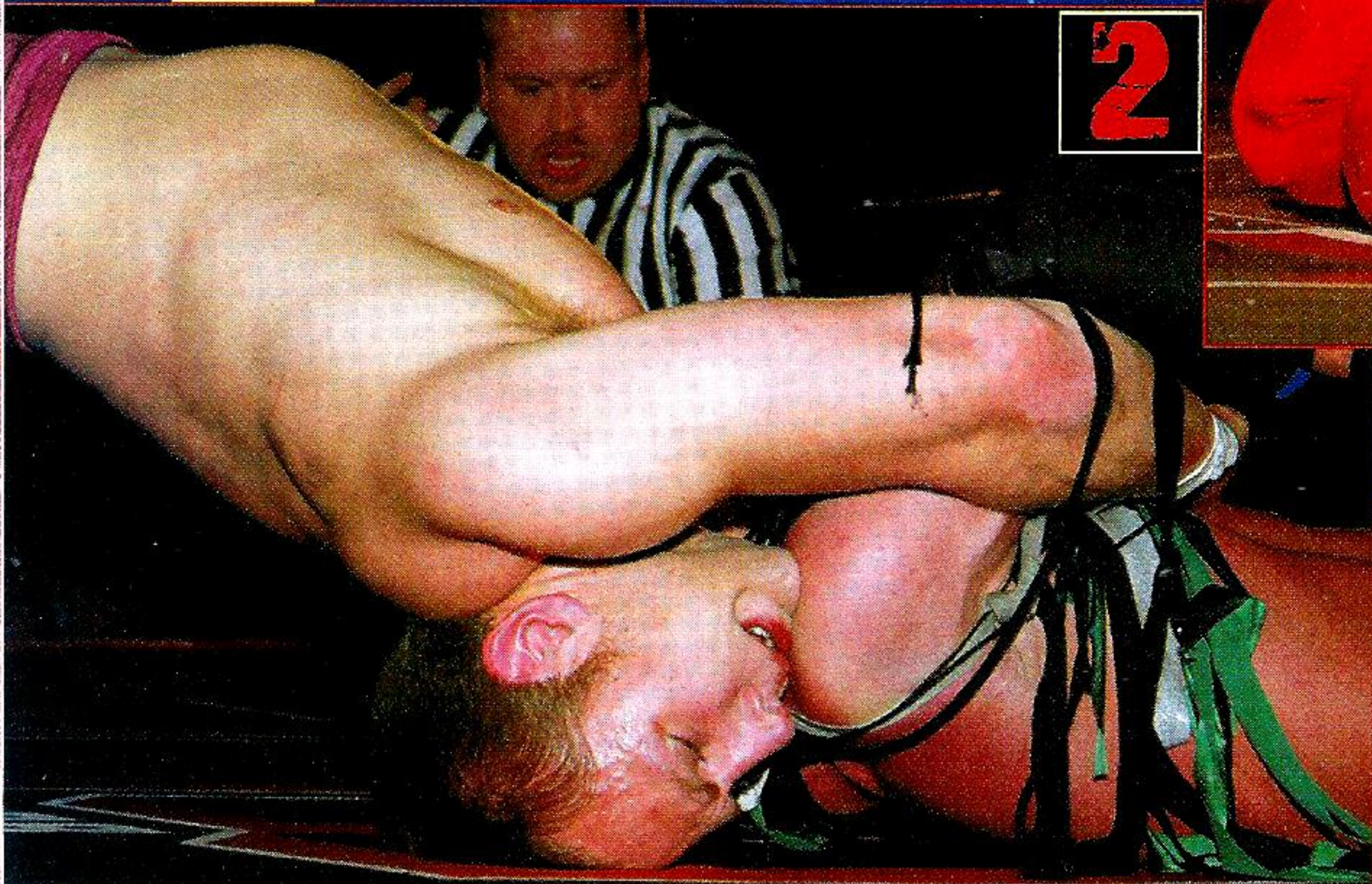
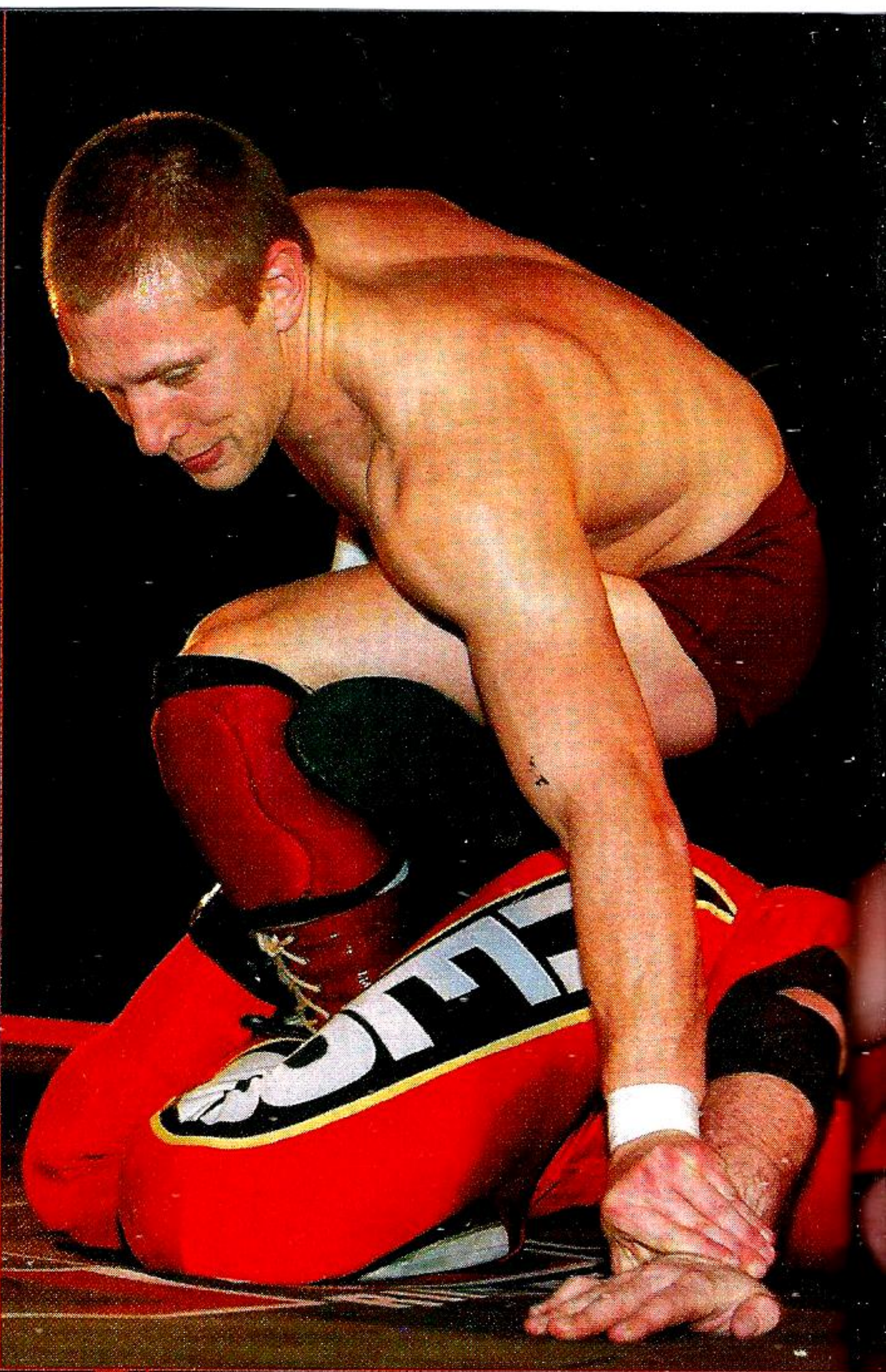
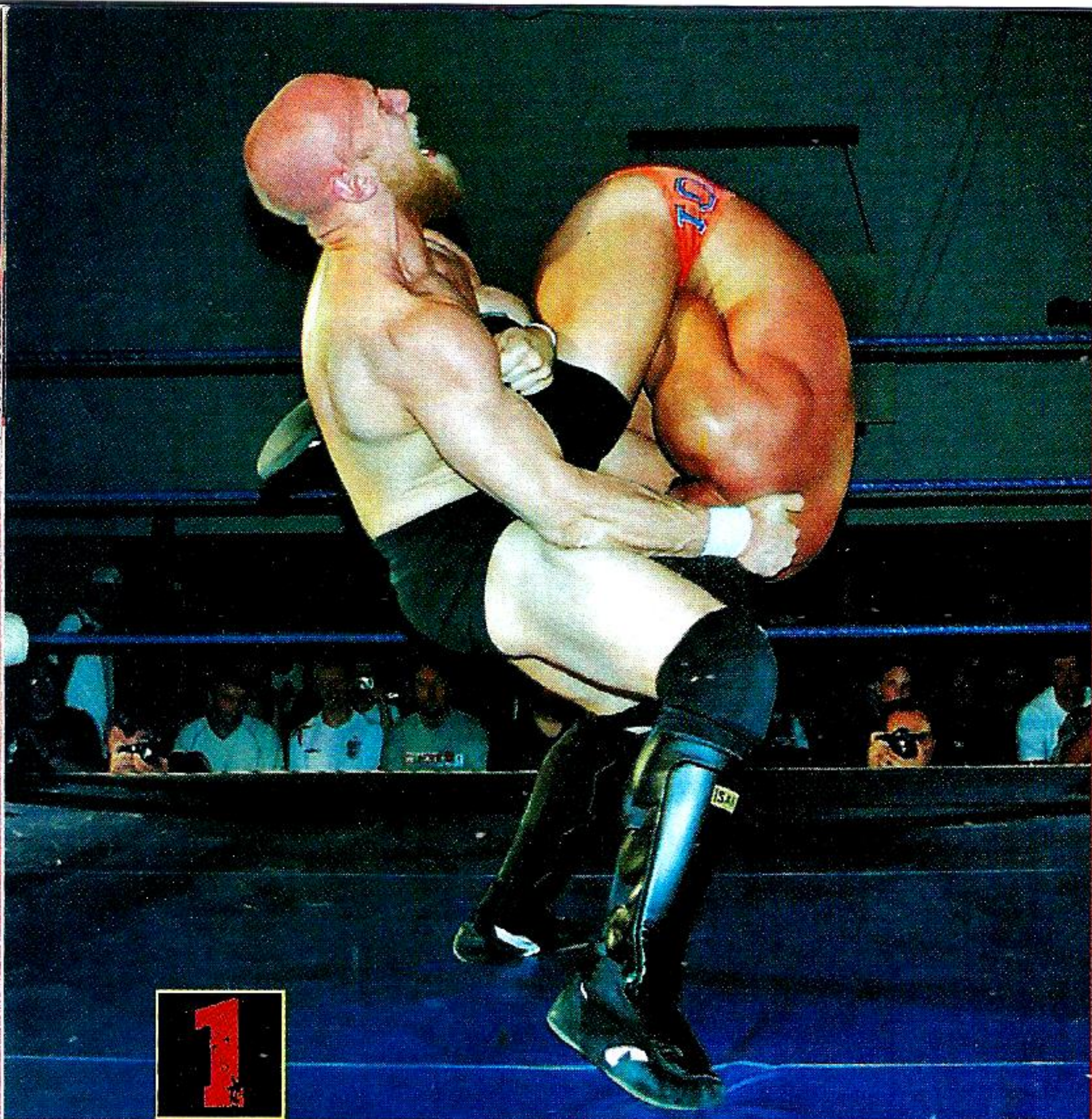
himself at his own pace. That will make all the difference. **GRADE: A**

OVERALL VALUE: Danielson helped save Ring of Honor after its top title bounced from Austin Aries to C.M. Punk to Gibson. Danielson won the strap and stabilized the environment. He became a champion the fans could respect. If Danielson hadn't been up to the challenge, ROH would be a very different place today. He is a credit to ROH and a credit to the sport of professional wrestling. **GRADE: A-**



**BRYAN
DANIELSON**





6

1 After a self-imposed exile from the sport, Bryan Danielson returned to Ring of Honor in late-2005 to take the title from a departing James Gibson.

2 Danielson has made it clear that he will not leave ROH for another promotion while he holds the title. At the rate he's going, he may be the promotion's first lifetime member.

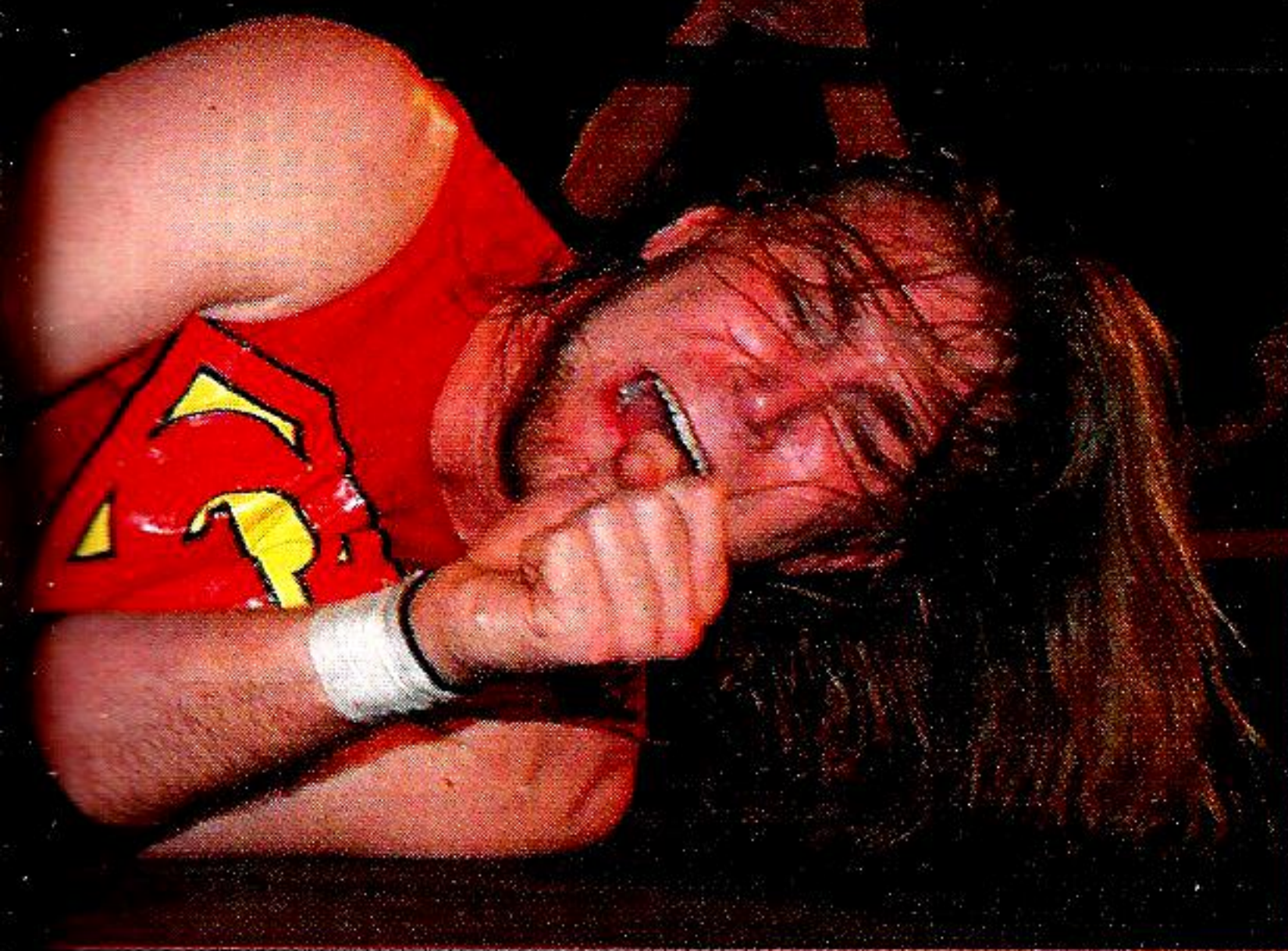
3 Danielson is widely considered to be the best technical wrestler not in either WWE or TNA. He has stepped into the ring with some of today's top talent, including Alex Shelley.

4 As if staving off a CZW invasion wasn't enough, Danielson also had to deal with ROH members—such as those in The Embassy—who were desperate for a shot at the title.

5 The ROH-CZW turf war proved that no member of either promotion was safe, regardless of the venue. Even at ROH shows, CZW made Danielson's life difficult.

6 Danielson was the focal point of the Ring of Honor-Combat Zone Wrestling feud. Seemingly every member of CZW attempted to call out the ROH champion—although none succeeded in taking his title.

BRYAN DANIELSON



MICKIE JAMES

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: For a woman routinely described as a psycho, Mickie James has brilliantly climbed to the top of the women's division. Since joining Raw as Trish Stratus' biggest fan, Mickie piled up the wins and waged mental warfare on her former idol, eventually taking the title from Stratus at WrestleMania 22. Ever since then, she has injured more people than discount fireworks. She has proven to be a dominant women's champion and has worked her way up to the top of the heap. **GRADE: A+**

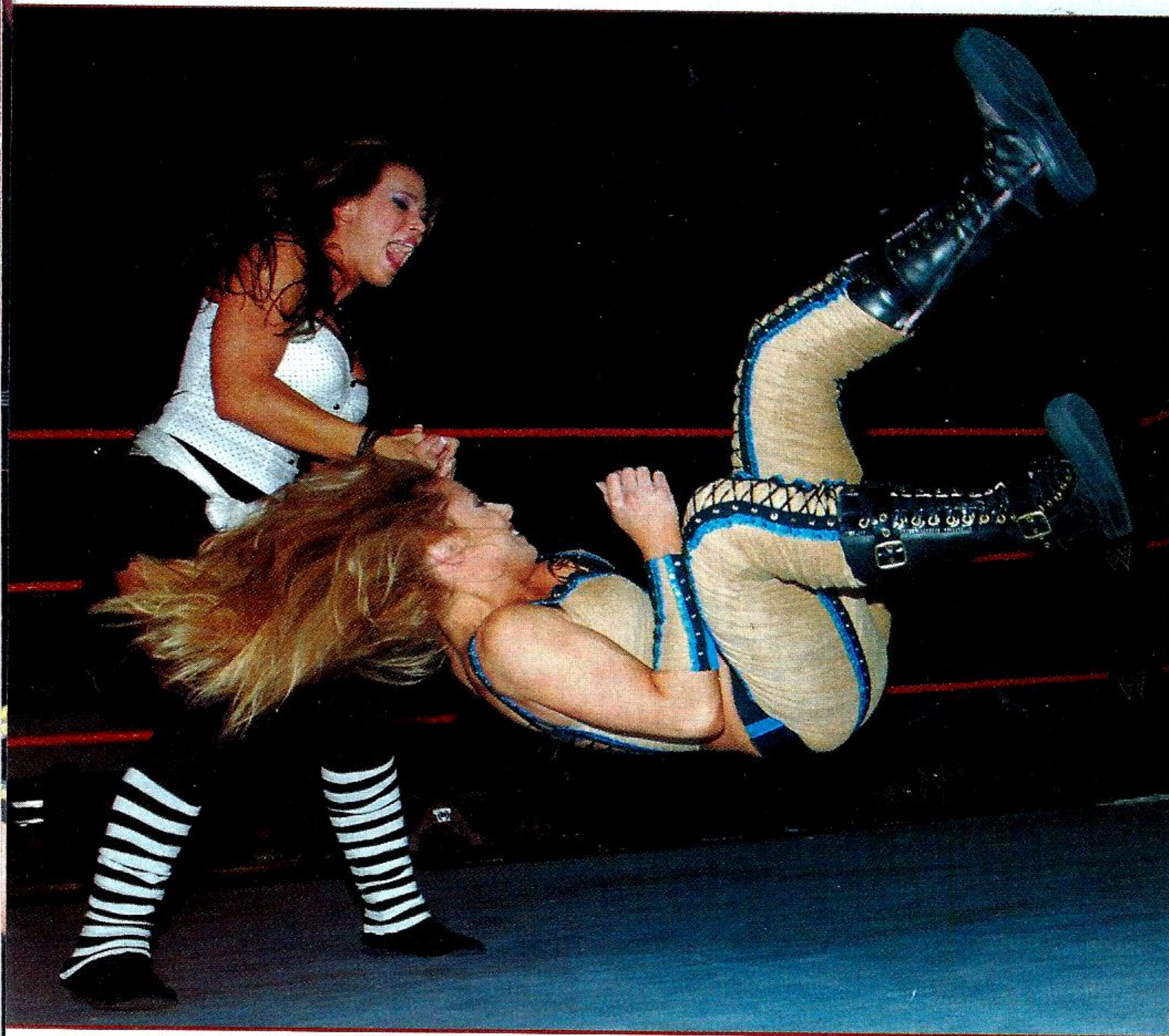
MARKETABILITY: Mickie may be a bit unorthodox, but it's hard to deny her appeal. At WrestleMania 22, the crowd turned her into the fan favorite during the match. She stands out from the rest of the Divas and elicits more of a reaction than any women except for perhaps Trish. However, while she may be a cult favorite, she's still a rulebreaker without a very defined persona. After all, her most memorable moments were when she was imitating Trish. In fact, we don't know

much about her as a person at all. You're not going to see a lot of Mickie T-shirts, but we can guarantee a "Best Of Mickie James" DVD compilation would be a top-seller. In fact, we'd buy one. **GRADE: B-**

REPERTOIRE: Mickie has shown she can be an excellent mimic. She has her own set of pet moves, such as her very dangerous spike BDT, but she also scouted Trish and incorporated her signature moves into her own moveset. Mickie's "Mick Kick" may not be quite as crisp as Trish's "Chick Kick," but she connects heavily, often slamming the ball of her foot into an opponent's temple. Some people may call it stealing moves, but if using someone else's signature moves helps win matches, we see nothing wrong with it at all. In fact, it's a smart strategy. **GRADE: B+**

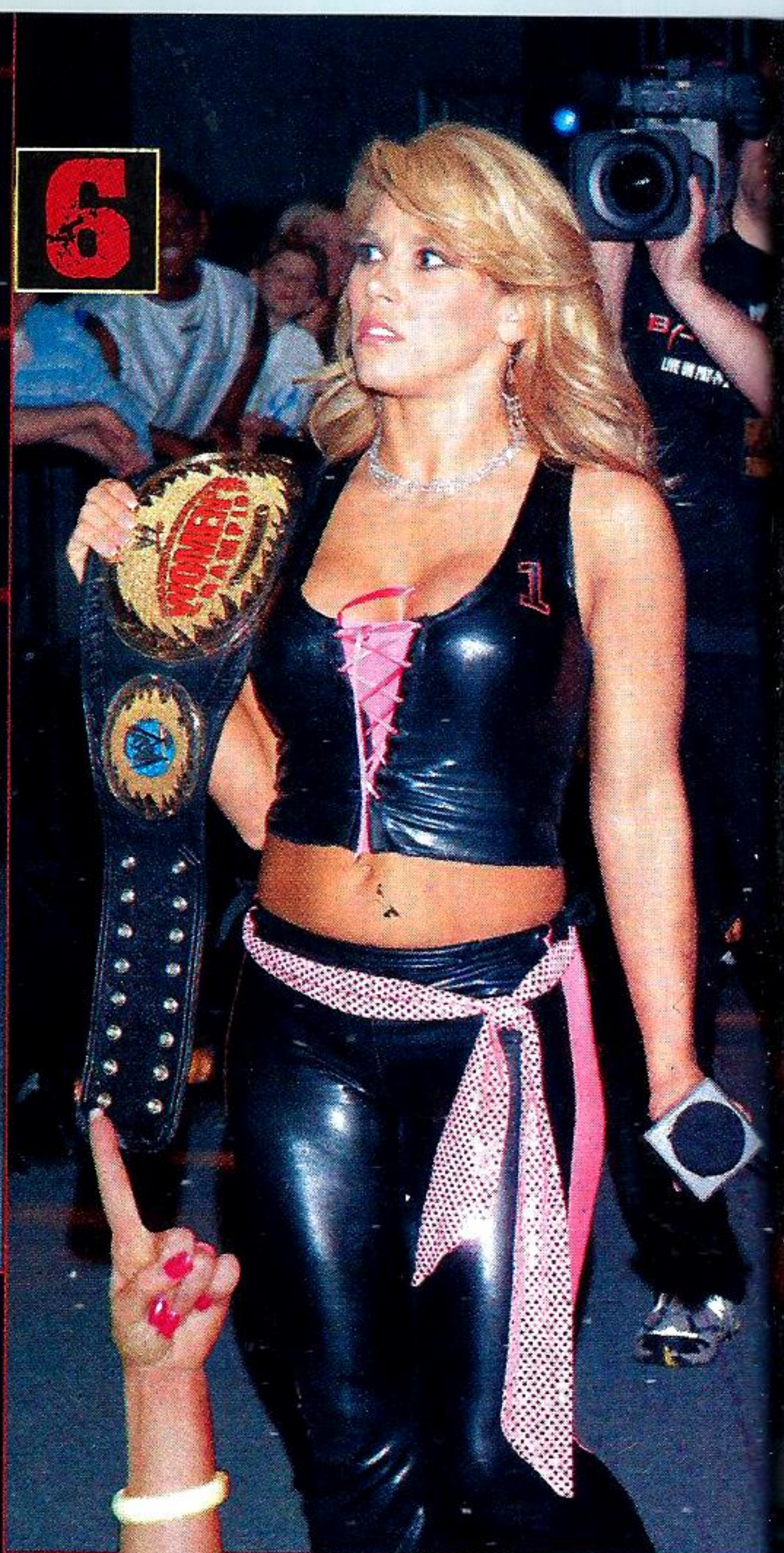
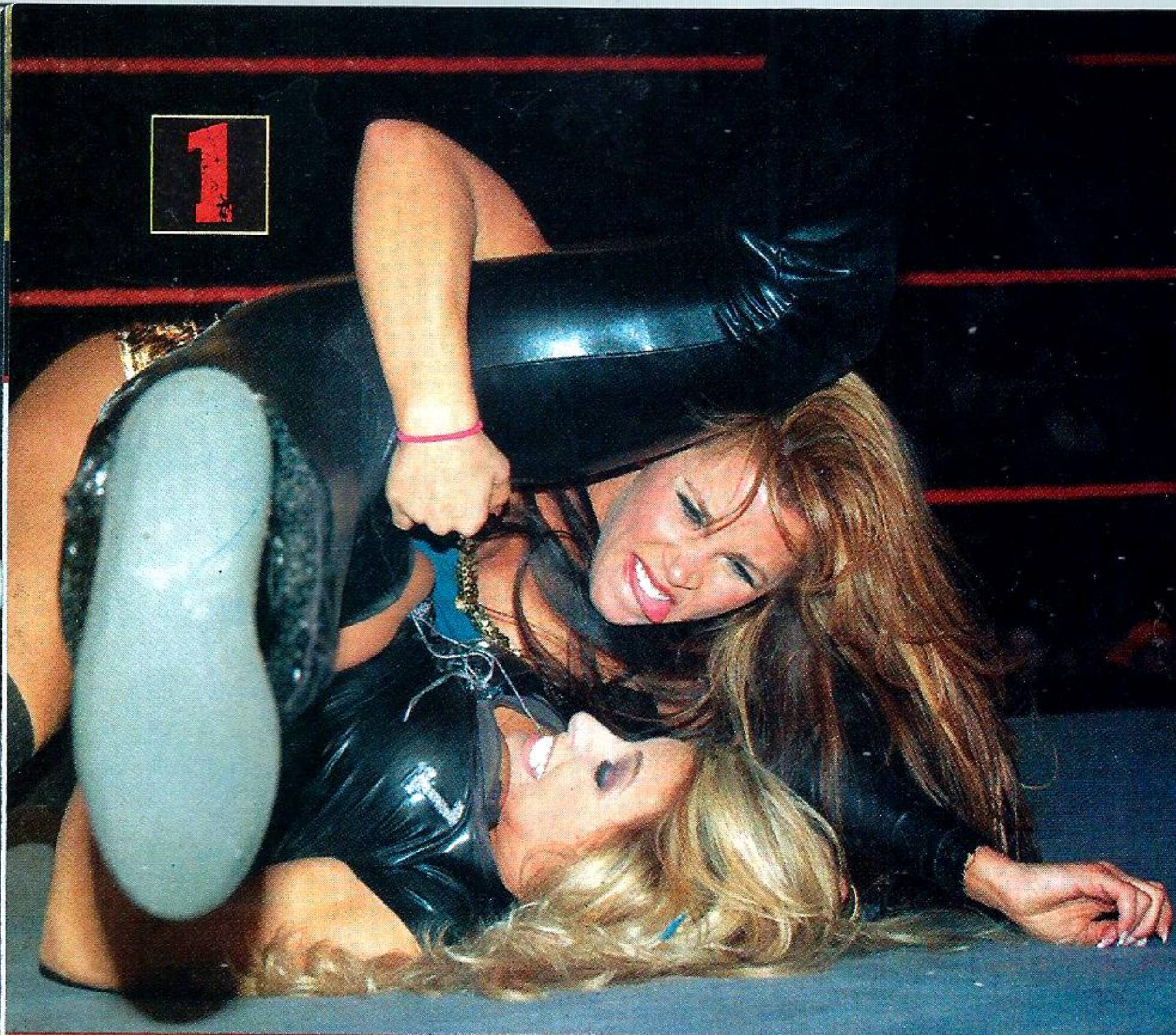
CAREER GROWTH: The past year has been the best year of Mickie's career. Like Beth Phoenix, she plied her trade for years on the independent circuit before landing in Ohio Valley Wrestling and eventually moving on to WWE. She won the women's title at WrestleMania 22, and isn't that pretty much the ultimate accomplishment for any woman wrestler? **GRADE: A+**

OVERALL VALUE: The Mickie James-Trish Stratus buildup to WrestleMania 22 was one of the most entertaining and well-executed storylines of the year. Mickie turned out to be exactly the sort of foil Trish needed—a compelling villain for the women's division. With the addition of Phoenix and Candice Michelle's continuing improvement as a wrestler, the division is getting stronger and stronger. Mickie has been equally adept at wrestling conventional matches as she has been competing in bra-and-panties matches. She is a huge asset to the women's division and the Raw brand. **GRADE: A-**

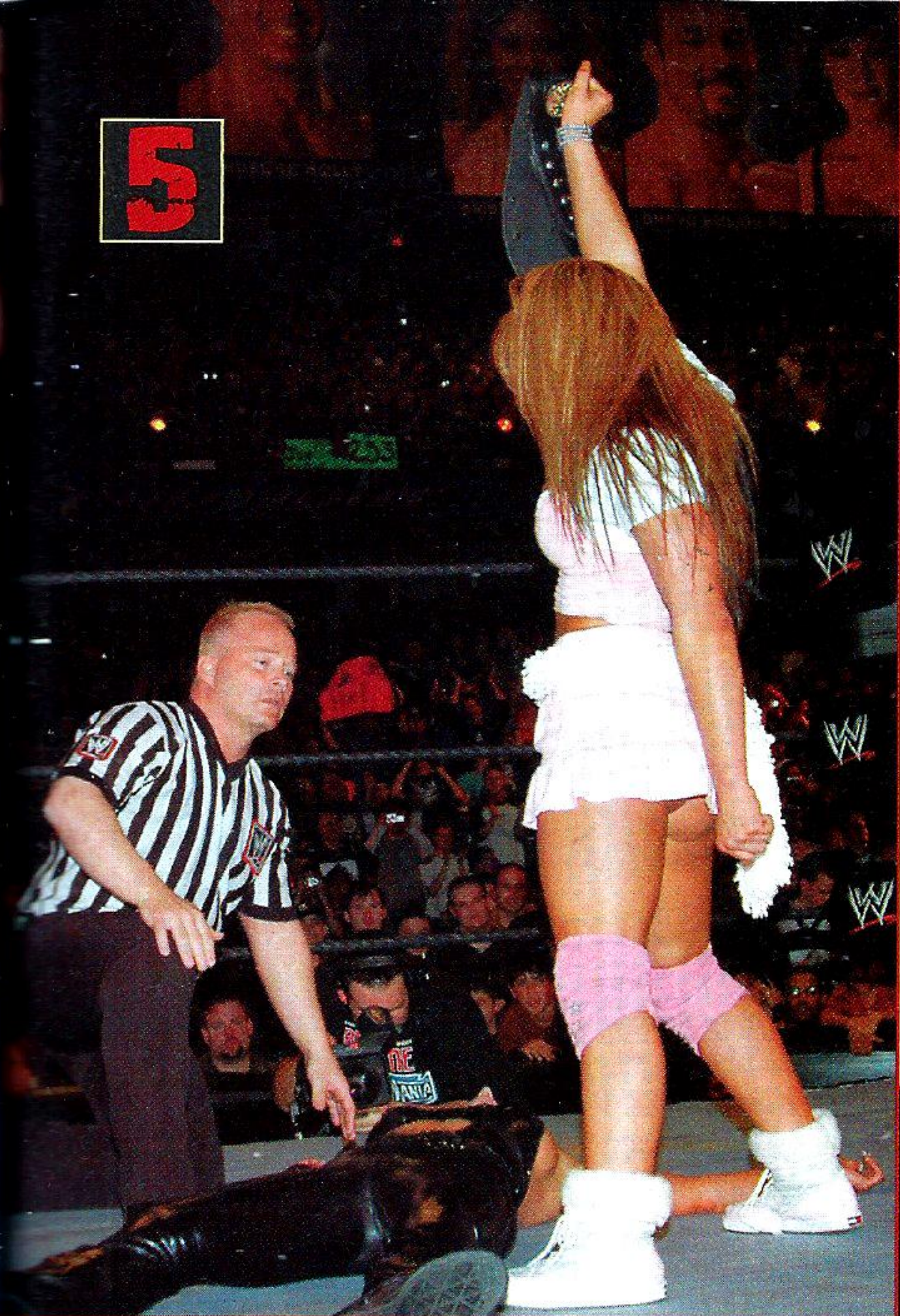


MICKIE
JAMES





5



1 James eventually earned a women's title shot at New Year's Revolution in January. In the weeks leading up to the match James made it clear that winning the title was secondary to making Stratus look good.

2 Mickie James' WWE career started in a very peculiar manner, as the borderline-obsessive Trish Stratus fan essentially became her idol's shadow.

3 Experiencing a drastic change of heart, James turned against Stratus, setting the stage for an exciting women's championship showdown at WrestleMania 22.

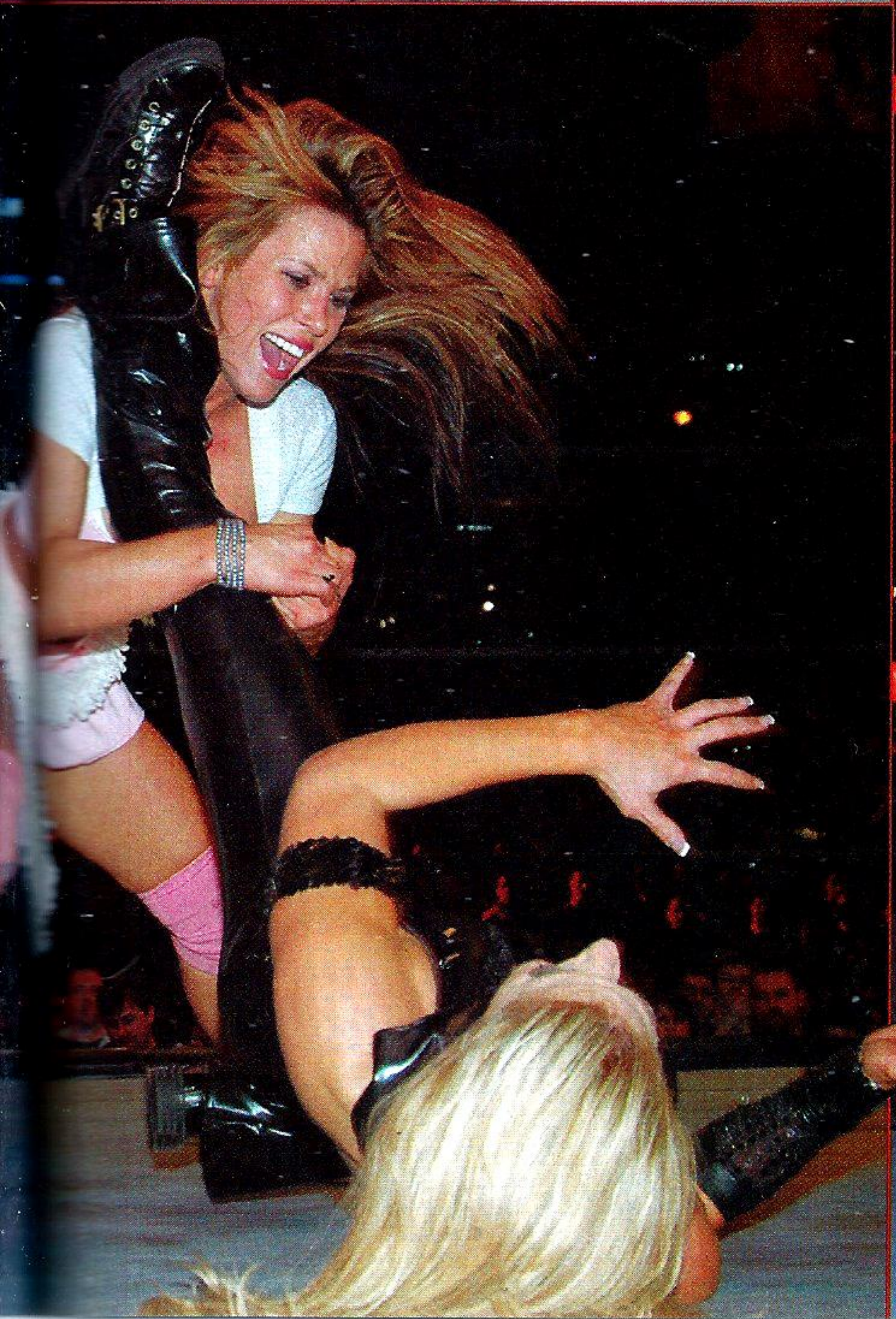
4 The champion returned to her old, psychotic self and thoroughly dominated Stratus at Backlash in late April. Stratus was injured in the match and was out of action for over a month.

5 Despite being a newcomer to WWE, James wrestled well beyond her years at 'Mania winning her first women's title and ending Stratus' 15-month reign as champion.

6 James continued the head-games she was playing with Stratus by adopting the former champion's image for a brief period of time following her victory at WrestleMania.

MICKIE JAMES

4



ROB VAN DAM

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: We had all but given up on Rob Van Dam ever winning that world championship that eluded him through his entire career. And considering how snake-bitten he has been in the luck department, we were sure his win over John Cena at One Night Stand II would be overturned the following night on *Raw*. But as incredible as it seems, Van Dam *did* beat Cena to win the Raw World title at One Night Stand, and RVD was also christened ECW champion by Paul Heyman. Talk about a two-fer! Van Dam has gotten incredibly close to winning major championships before, both in the original ECW and in WWE, but his momentum was always destroyed by injury, politics, or his own lackadaisical attitude. RVD has finally gotten the monkey off his back. **GRADE: A+**

MARKETABILITY: Van Dam has always been a cult favorite and a perennially strong merchandise seller. You would think that, now that he's finally won a world title, his marketability would be at an all-time high, but that's not necessarily the case. Van Dam is the public face of ECW, and ECW is still drawing some pretty mixed reviews in its early stages. If the ECW experiment flops and goes the way of the XFL, Van Dam is going to catch an awful lot of blowback. His cool, rebellious image will be badly damaged if ECW fails. If it succeeds, however, RVD's popularity will skyrocket. **GRADE: B**

REPERTOIRE: Van Dam's kickboxing background and his acrobatic style make him a difficult man to beat. To be honest, he's not much of a wrestler in the conventional sense, but he's an elite striker with his feet, knees, and palms. If Kurt Angle is going to go back to basics with more of a mat-based attack in ECW, we'd like to see Van Dam employ some more of his kickboxing skills—especially Muay-Tai knee strikes and clutches. He could be even more effective if he went back to basics. **GRADE: B**

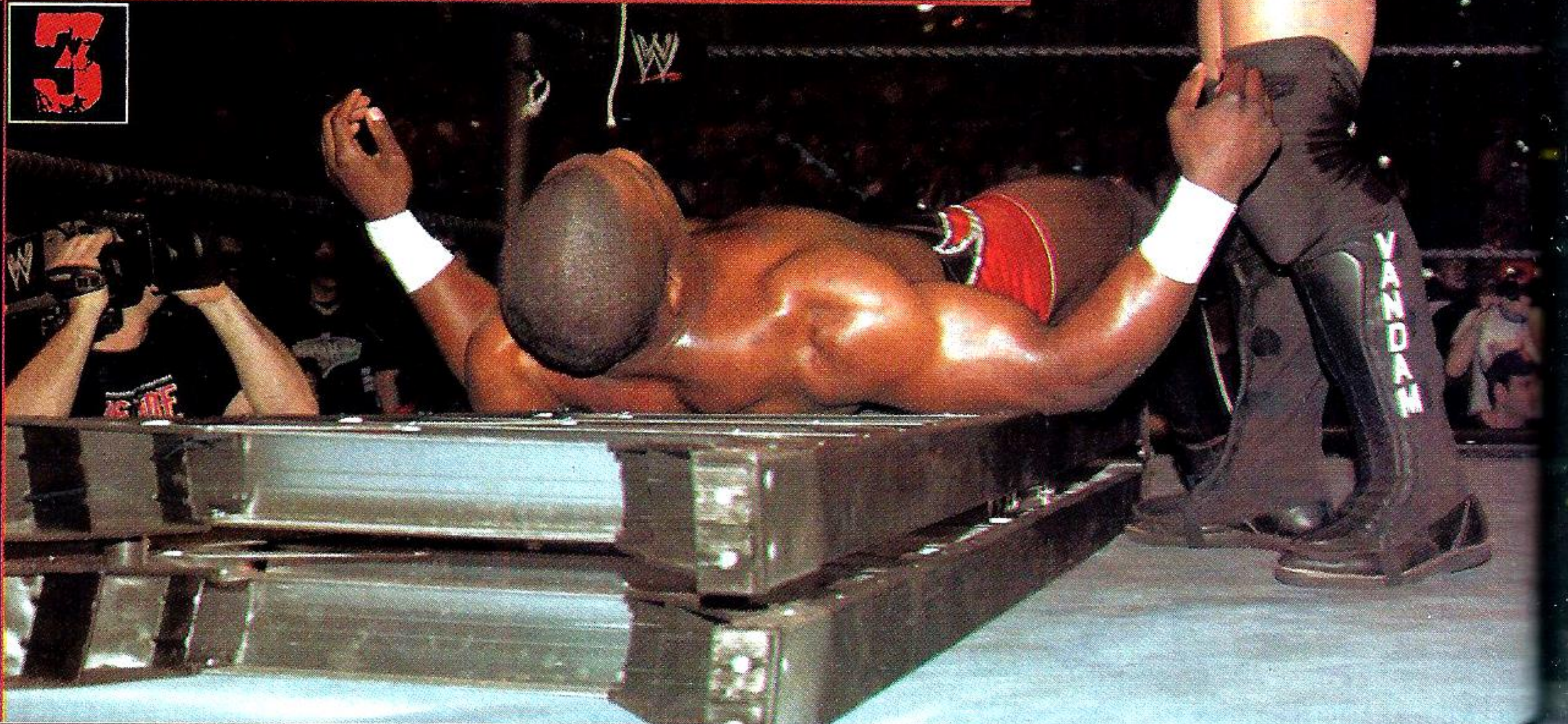
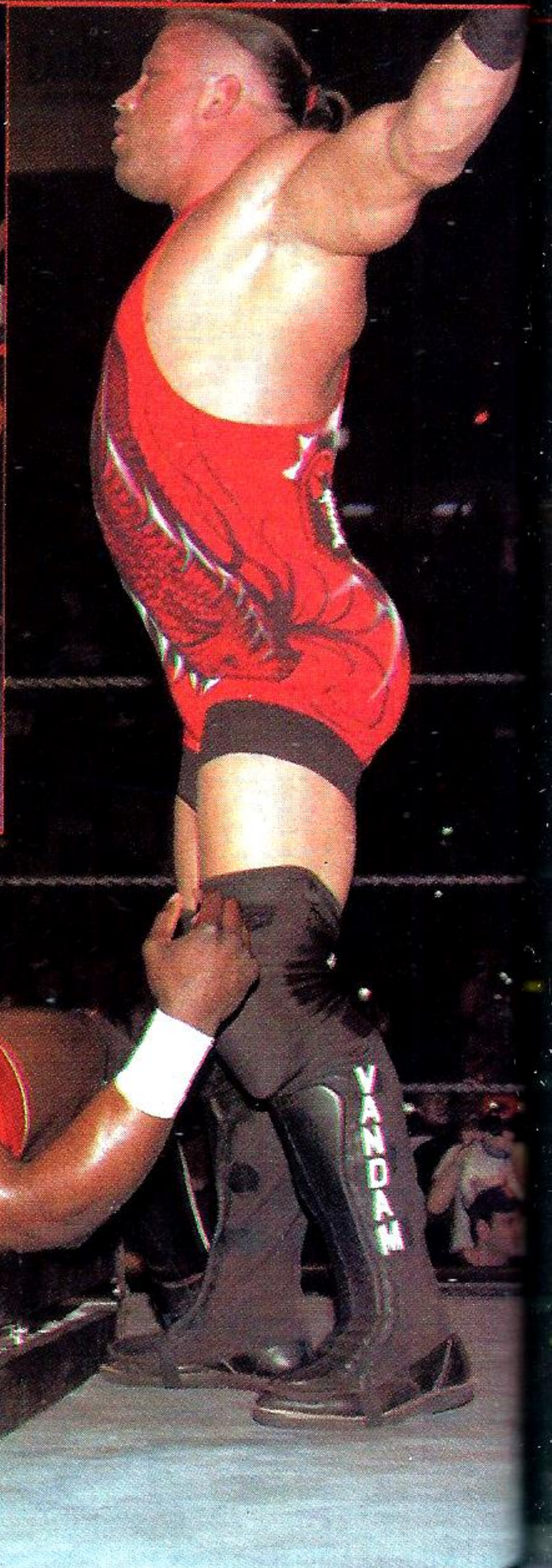
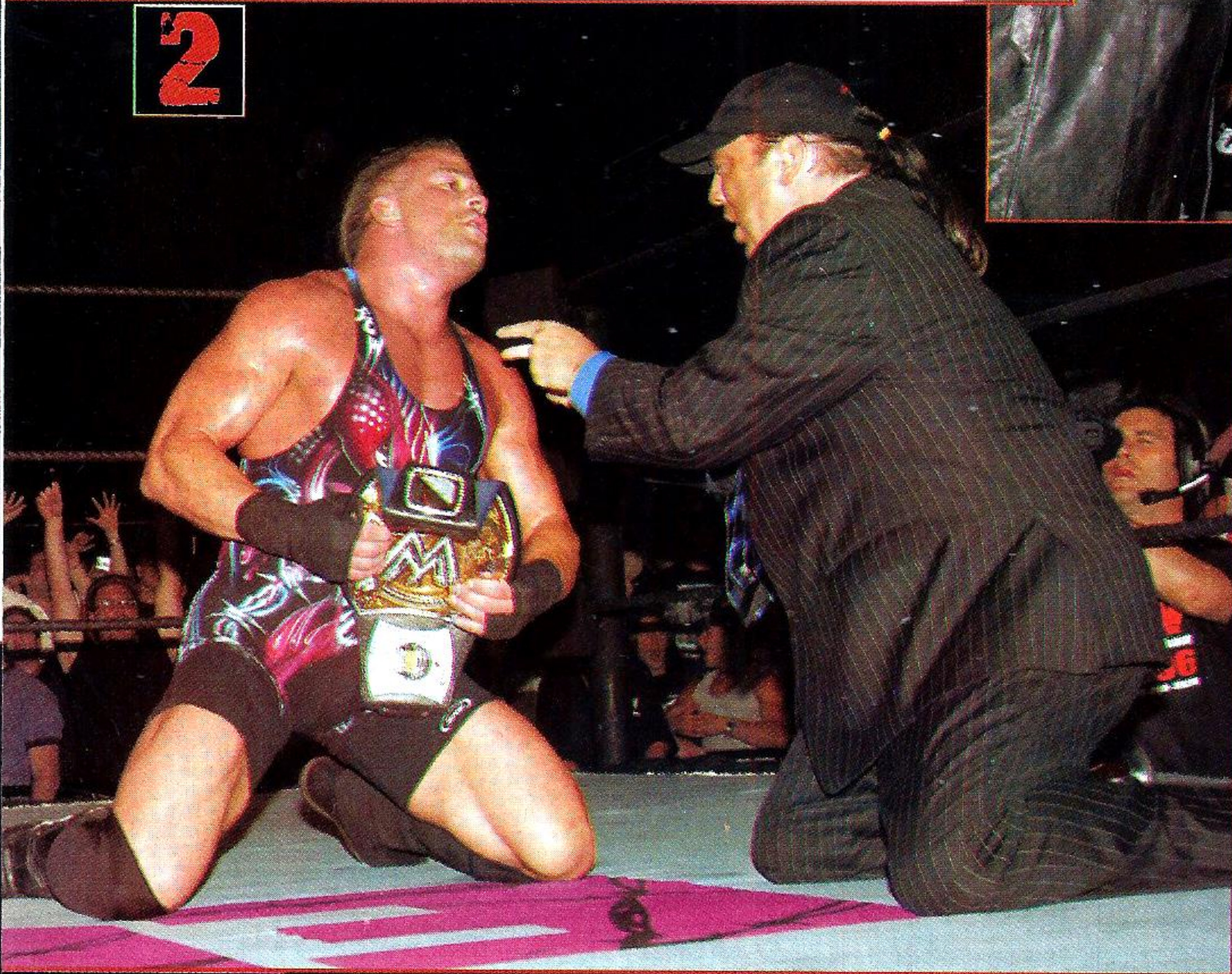
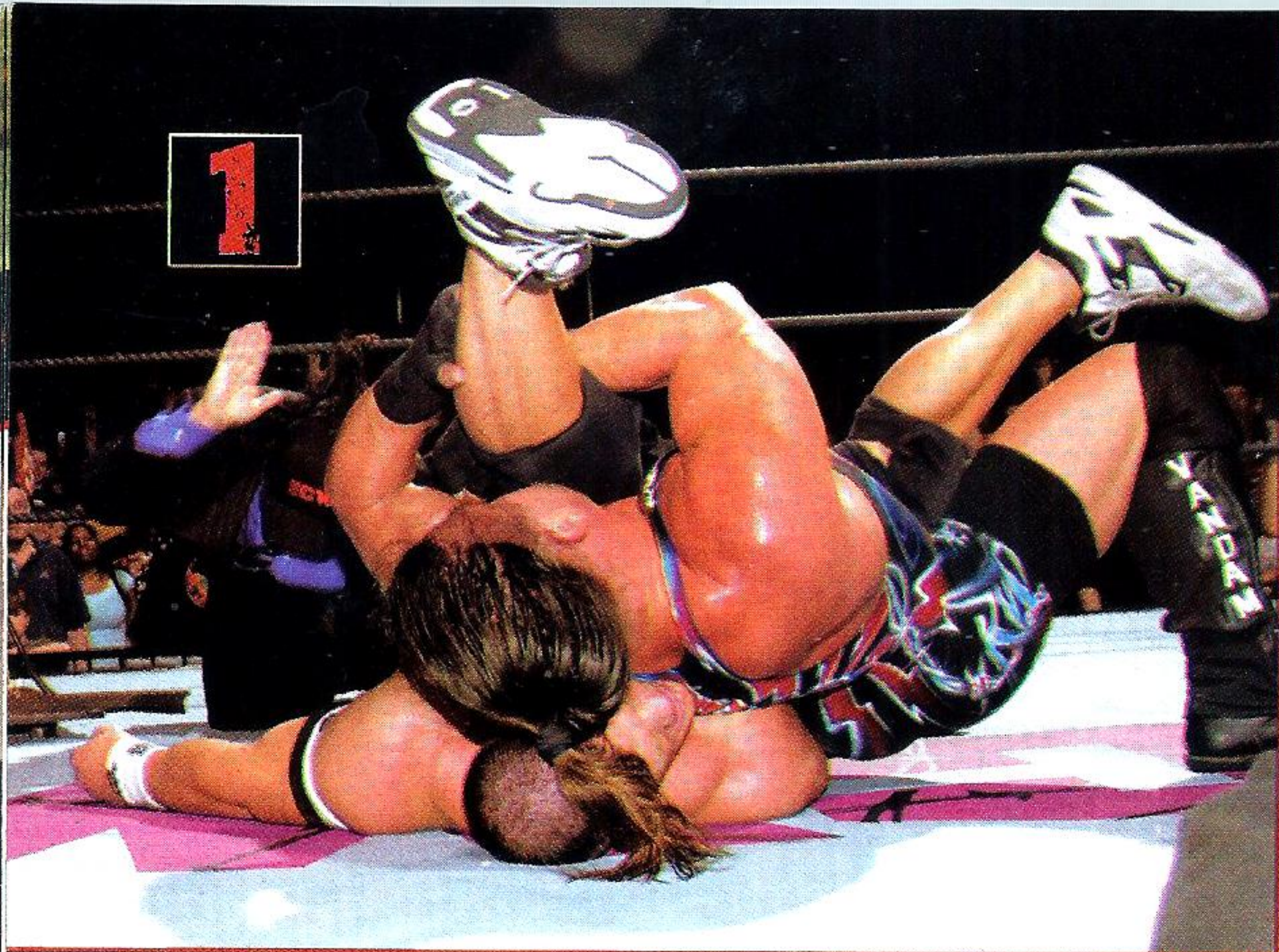
CAREER GROWTH: Van Dam finally lived up to his potential, first by winning the "Money-In-The-Bank" ladder match at WrestleMania 22 and then by cashing that title shot in at One Night Stand. He's finally broken out of the Intercontinental title level and gotten back to PPV main events for the first time since 2001. **GRADE: A**

OVERALL VALUE: No one is quite sure how the new ECW will work out. Will it be built around old faces from ECW's past, like Sabu, Sandman, and Dreamer, or built around new WWE arrivals like Angle and The Big Show? Either way, one thing is certain: Van Dam is the most vital piece of the puzzle. He's the cornerstone of the new ECW, and he's more valuable to WWE today than he has ever been. **GRADE: A-**



ROB
VAN DAM





ROB VAN DAM

1 The pinnacle of Van Dam's 2006—as well as his career—came at ECW's One Night Stand II where “Mr. Monday Night” captured his first world championship by defeating John Cena.

2 Van Dam's Raw World title win was immediately shrouded in controversy as not only did WWE's Edge interfere, but Paul Heyman made the count in the pinfall victory.

3 Rob Van Dam returned from a yearlong layoff following knee surgery. Van Dam soon secured a spot in the “Money-In-The-Bank” ladder match at WrestleMania 22.

4 Van Dam overcame five other competitors to take home the coveted briefcase containing a contract for a guaranteed world title shot.

5 Riding an epic hot streak, Van Dam captured the Intercontinental title for the sixth time in his career. He would later lose the strap to Shelton Benjamin in a “Texas Tornado” match on *Raw*.

6 Naturally, the egomaniacal Edge took credit for Van Dam's title victory. The “Rated R Superstar” and former champ Cena have been pursuing Van Dam and the coveted title.

6

5

WRESTLE

4

SHELTON BENJAMIN

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: When we handed out our Report Cards last time, Shelton Benjamin was spinning his wheels worse than a semi in a mudslide. Kerwin (Chavo Guerrero Jr.) White and Chris Masters were handing him regular beatings and rumors were flying that Benjamin was going to get a pink slip from WWE. Fortunately, an intervention from Shelton's mama brought him out of his slump and back to the Intercontinental title. Benjamin is well into his third reign as I-C champ and seems to be just a few steps away from challenging for the Raw World title. That's one heck of a turnaround! **GRADE: A+**

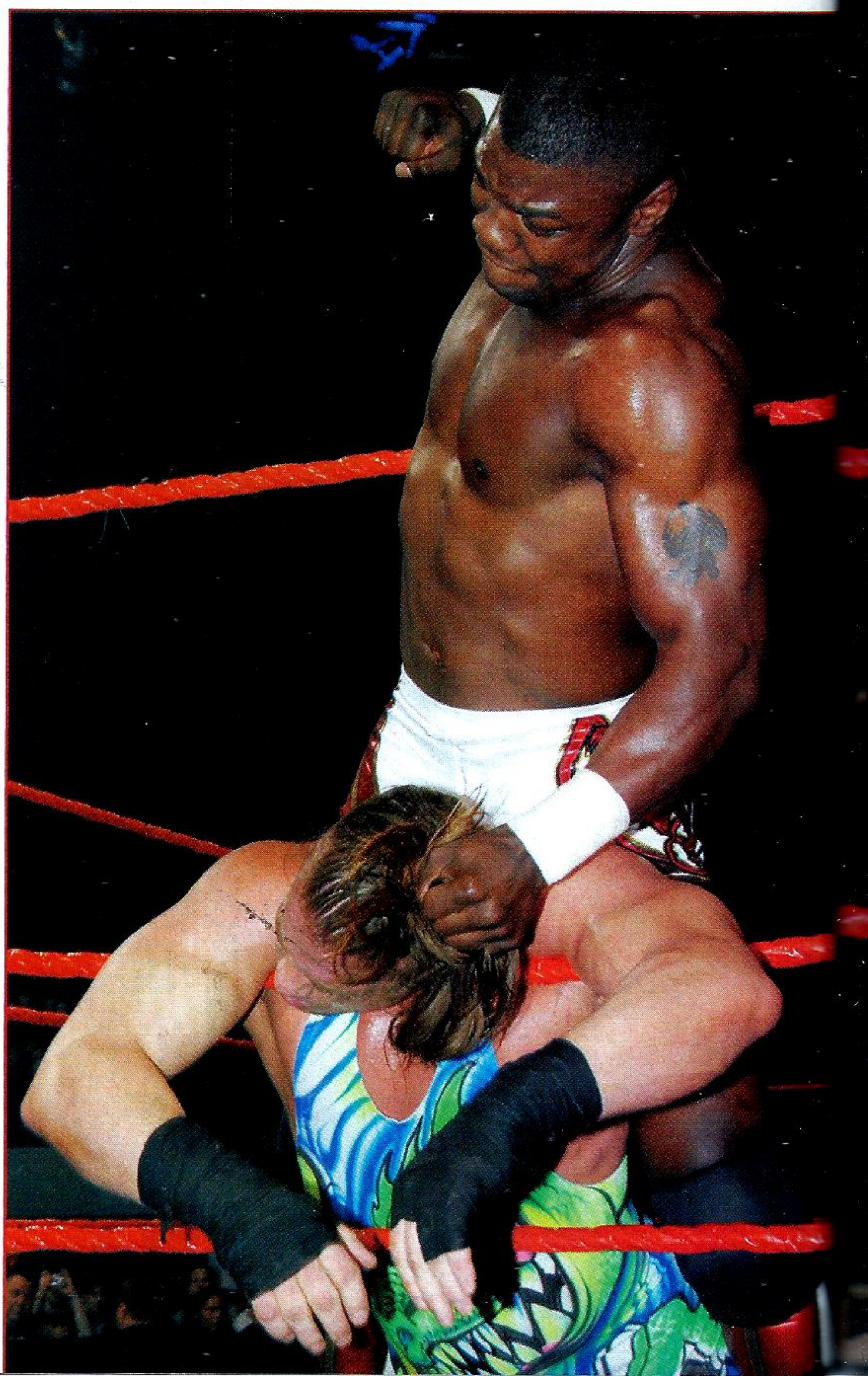
MARKETABILITY: Certainly, Shelton as "Mama's Boy" wasn't exactly going to move a lot of T-shirts, but now that he's dumped Mama and picked up his trash-talking a little, Benjamin is starting to earn some respect. He's still awfully bland, but at least he's showing a little bit of potential. And, if he's looking for a good catchphrase, given his reputation as a top-notch gamer backstage, we suggest, "You just got played." Now *that* would look good on a T-shirt! **GRADE: B**

REPERTOIRE: Benjamin is one of the top technical wrestlers in the sport today, and—from bell to bell—one of the most exciting. A former collegiate all-American, Benjamin has always been more concerned about his wrestling than popping off catchphrases or cutting promos. Unfortunately, Benjamin hasn't quite learned what moves to use at what times. He frequently misses openings or rushes moves that would be better utilized after a good set-up maneuver. The ability and know-how is there, but, without that veteran killer instinct, a lot of it is going to waste. **GRADE: B+**

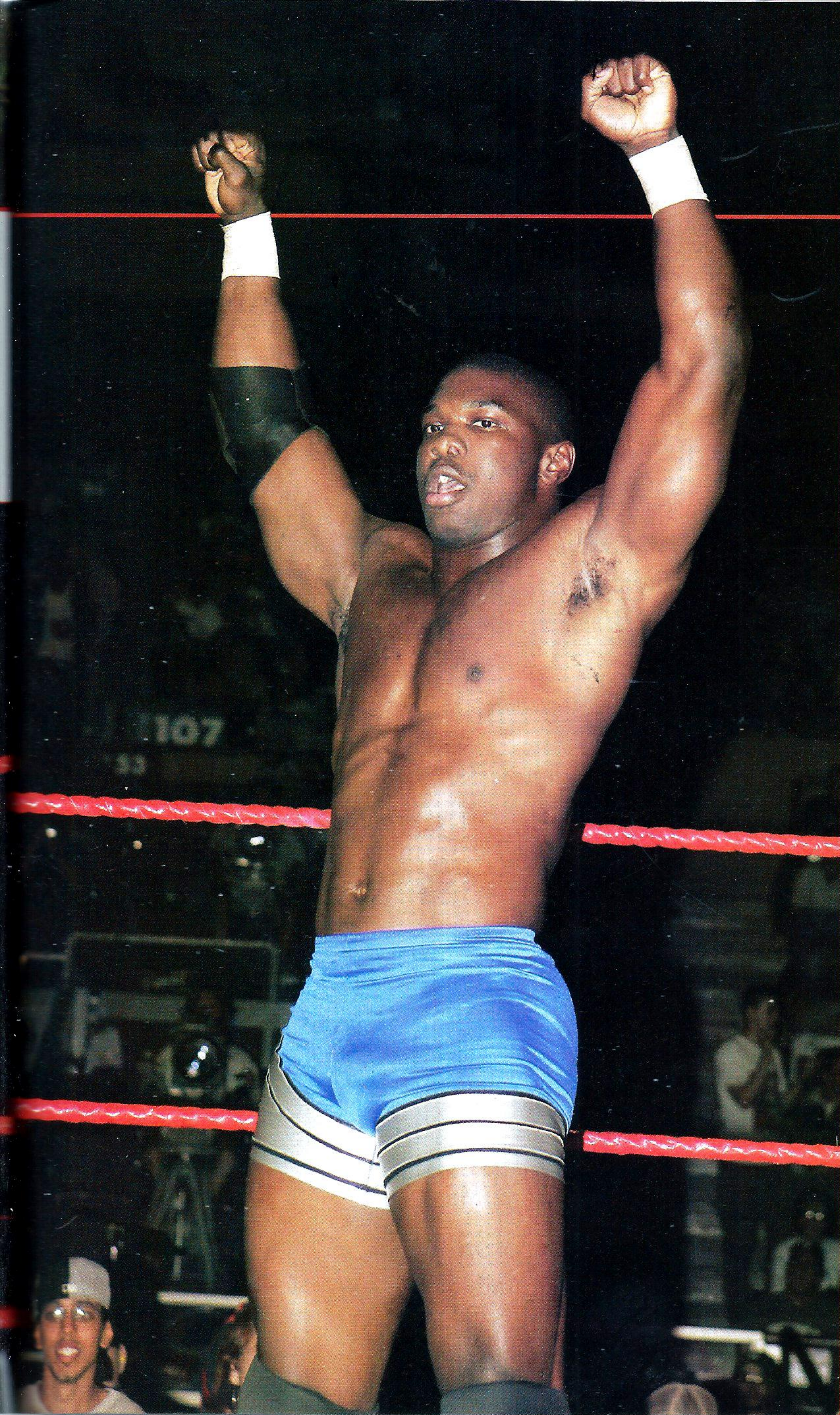
CAREER GROWTH: Again, compared to where he was at this time last year, Benjamin is in a much better place. But, frankly, he should still be higher up on the card than he is. It wasn't all that long ago that Shelton handed Triple-H two consecutive losses on back-to-back editions of *Raw*. He stole the show in two "Money-In-The-Bank" ladder matches, and had a Match of the Year candidate against Shawn Michaels. All that and

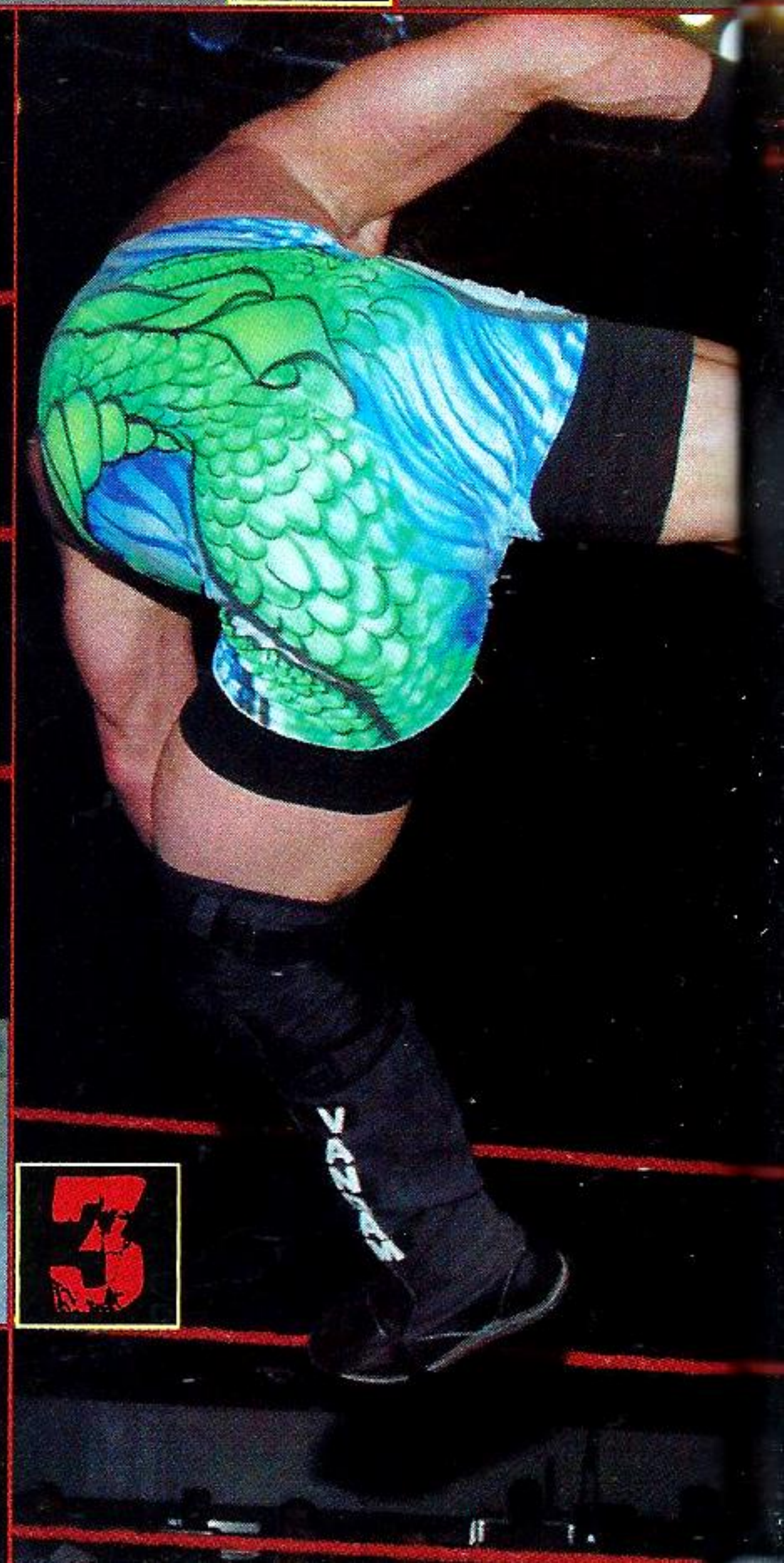
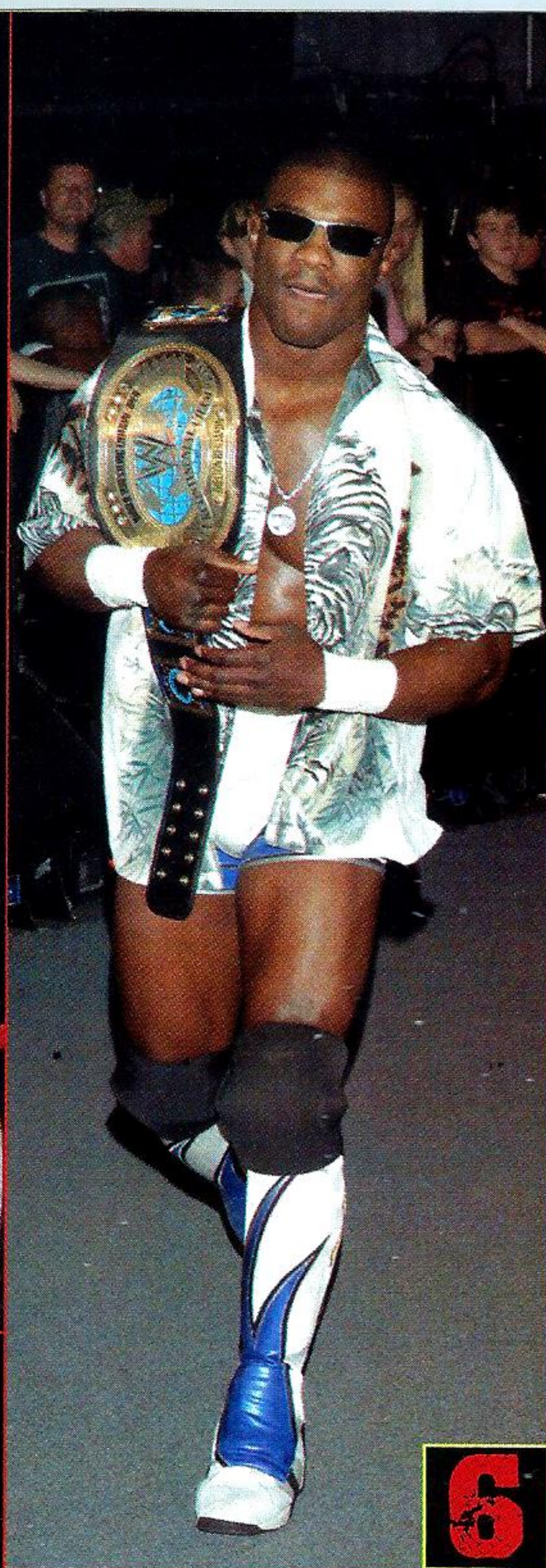
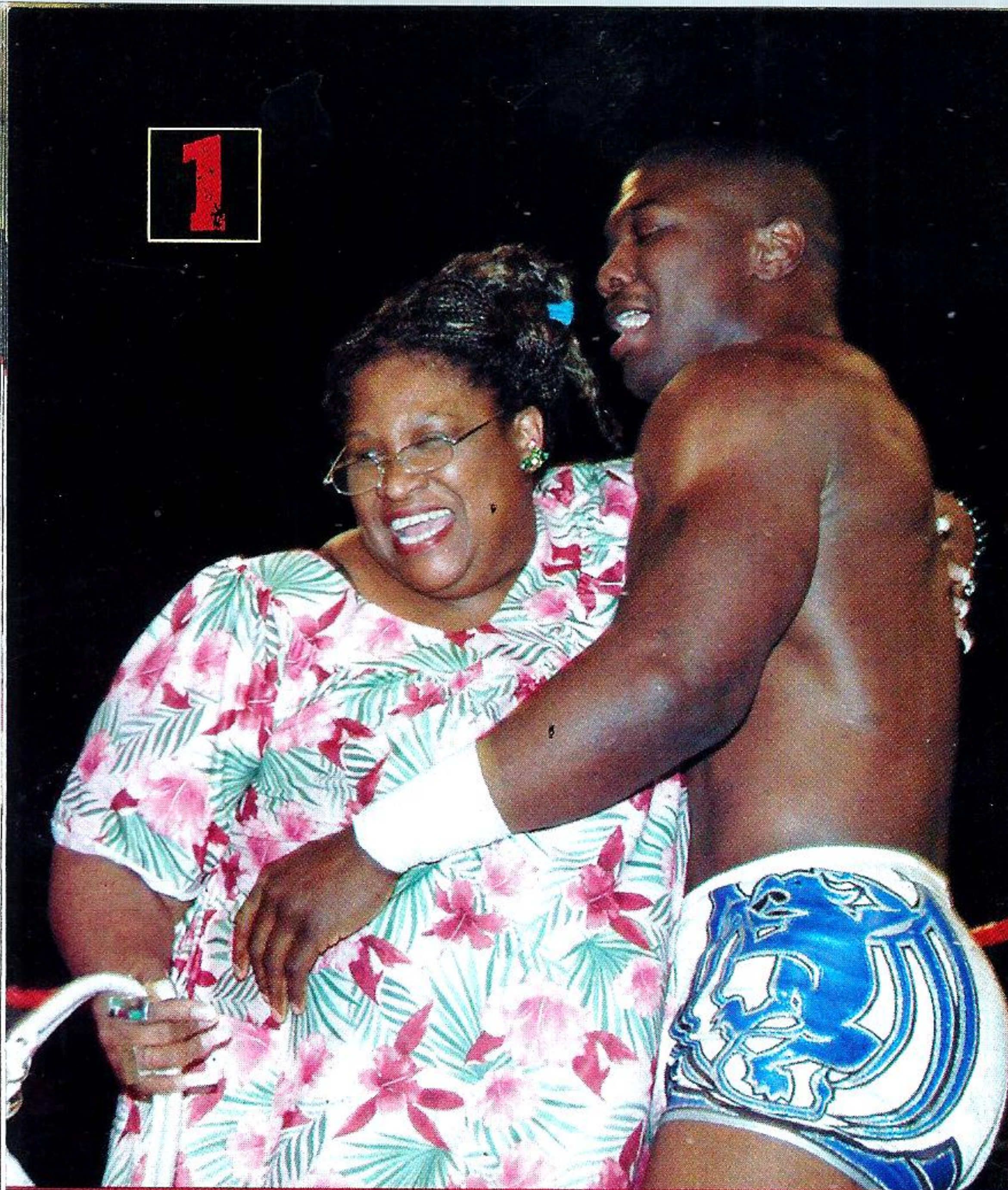
Benjamin gets zero consideration for world title shots. He's better off now than he was last year, but, given his ability, he's still not where he should be. **GRADE: B-**

OVERALL VALUE: Benjamin is one of the young lions of the Raw brand. He has succeeded in his recent roles both as butt-kissing mama's boy, and ultra-athletic bad boy. For now, Benjamin is a solid rôle player for the Raw brand, and, with just a little more work, he can be one of the company's main event talents. That type of wrestler is always going to be in demand. **GRADE: B+**

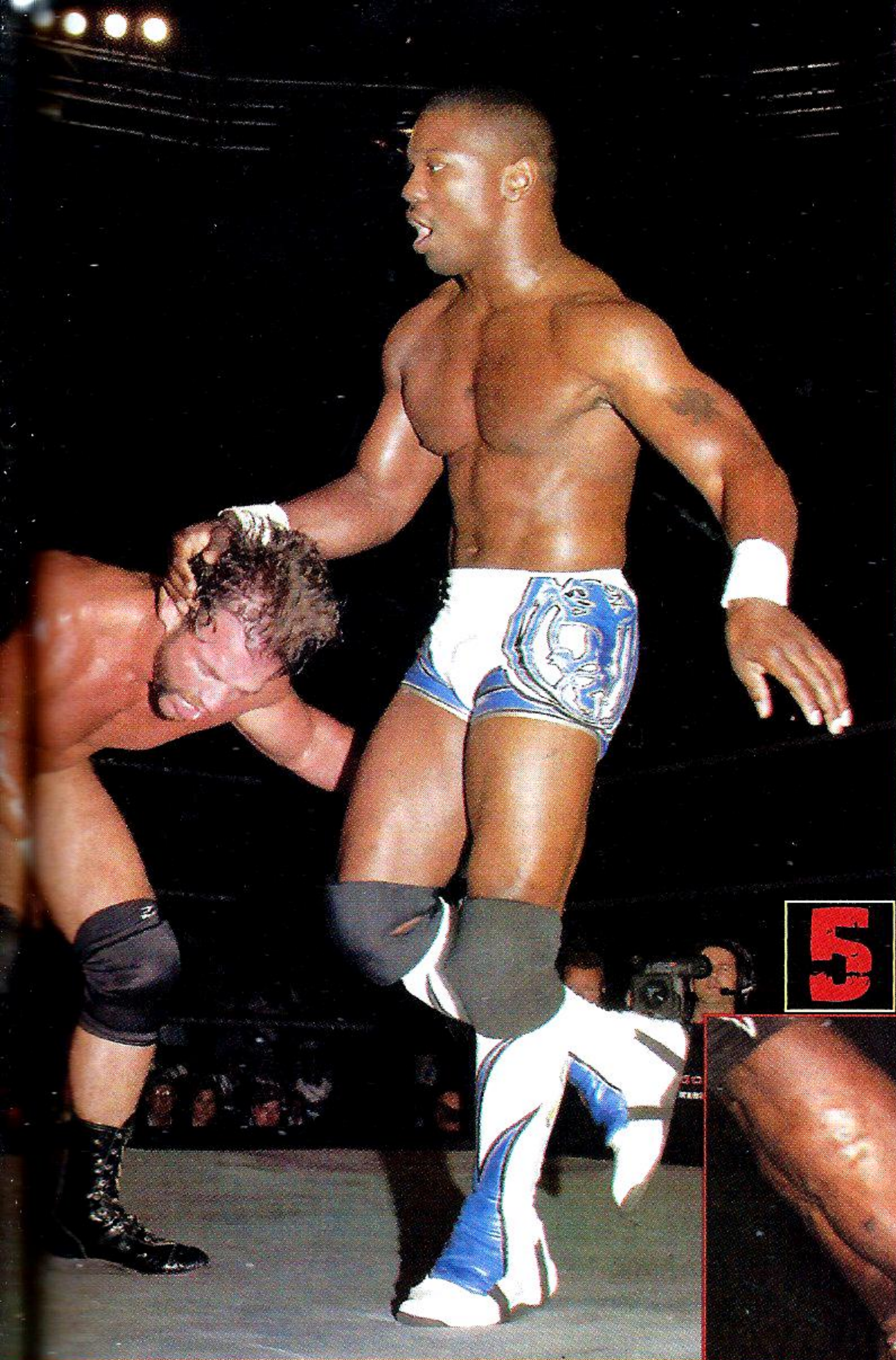


SHELTON
BENJAMIN





SHELTON BENJAMIN



1 Shelton brought his mama to ringside after a series of loses to motivate him during his matches. Mama did more than motivate, bringing purses and oxygen tanks to her baby's aid.

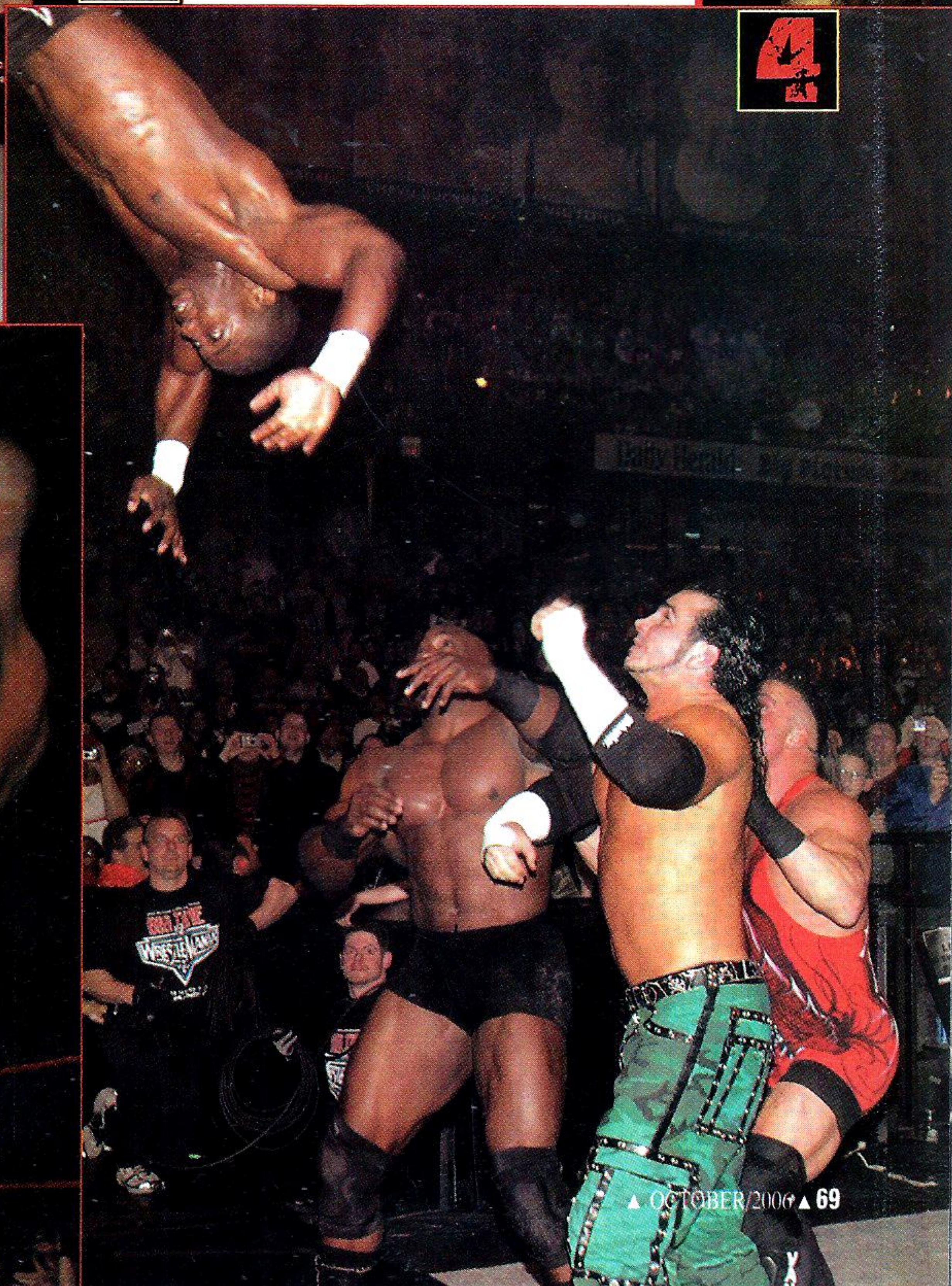
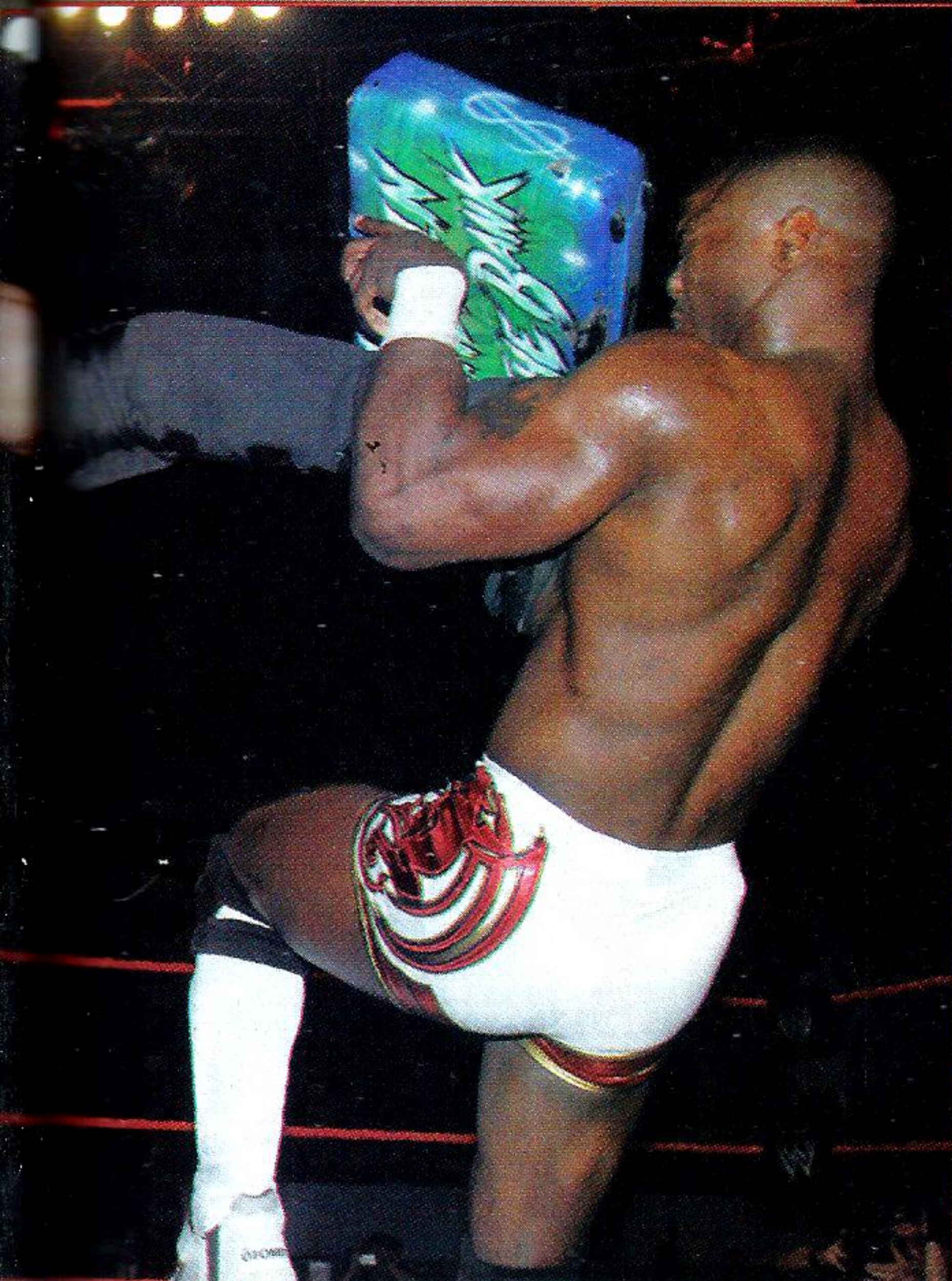
2 At New Year's Revolution, Benjamin defeated Viscera after a wallop of Mama's pocketbook.

3 Shelton Benjamin lost his Intercontinental title to Rob Van Dam at Backlash, giving RVD the belt to accompany his money-in-the-bank title shot.

4 Benjamin dives off the top rope onto his competitors—Matt Hardy, Bobby Lashley, and Rob Van Dam—at WrestleMania 22.

5 Shelton Benjamin engages in a head-to-head battle on April 17 against former Team Angle partner Charlie Haas on *Raw*.

6 Benjamin reclaimed the Intercontinental title on *Raw* on May 15 from the hands of RVD, only to lose it to Johnny Nitro a few weeks later at another *Raw* taping on June 25.



BOOKER T

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: You have to be impressed by a man who wins a championship without participating in the championship match. That's exactly what Booker T managed to do, hiring Randy Orton to help him win his best-of-seven series against Chris Benoit for the U.S. title. Unfortunately for Booker, his groin injury prevented him from picking up any momentum as champion, and he fell into a major slump that saw him suffer an embarrassingly one-sided loss to The Boogeyman at WrestleMania 22. Things didn't look good for Booker, but he rebounded nicely by winning the King of the Ring tournament. It was exactly what he needed to break out of his slump and get back into contention for the Smackdown World title. **GRADE: B**

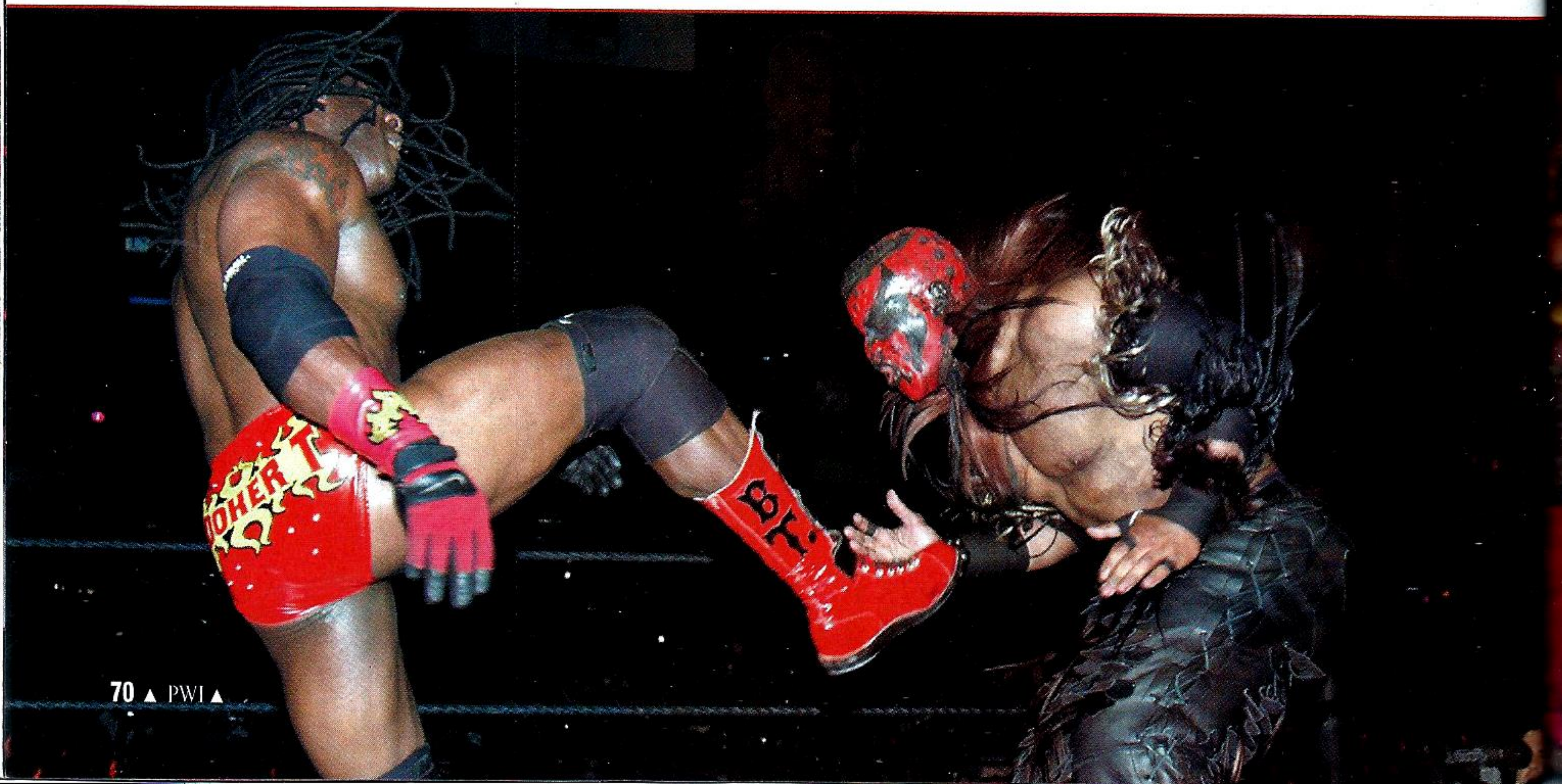
MARKETABILITY: A regal makeover may be just the ticket for King Booker. While recovering from his groin injury, Booker and Sharmell showed true comic flair in backstage vignettes. If Booker ever wants a career change, he should definitely consider becoming a full-time color commentator, as he was just priceless on the mike. Booker has always had the skill, he just needed that extra flair to help him get to the top of WWE. With Sharmell and his fancy new royal garments, Booker now *has* that little extra. King Booker (particularly in the company of William Regal) could become a cult favorite. **GRADE: B+**

REPERTOIRE: Booker is one of the most fluid wrestlers in WWE. He seamlessly transitions from

an armbar to a high back kick to a kick to the mid-section into a crunching axe kick off the ropes. Booker is an expert striker with tremendous stamina and underrated power. He can hold his own against anybody. As for his technical grappling abilities, Booker has gone toe-to-toe with Ric Flair, Triple-H, and Chris Benoit. Obviously he's no slouch. **GRADE: A**

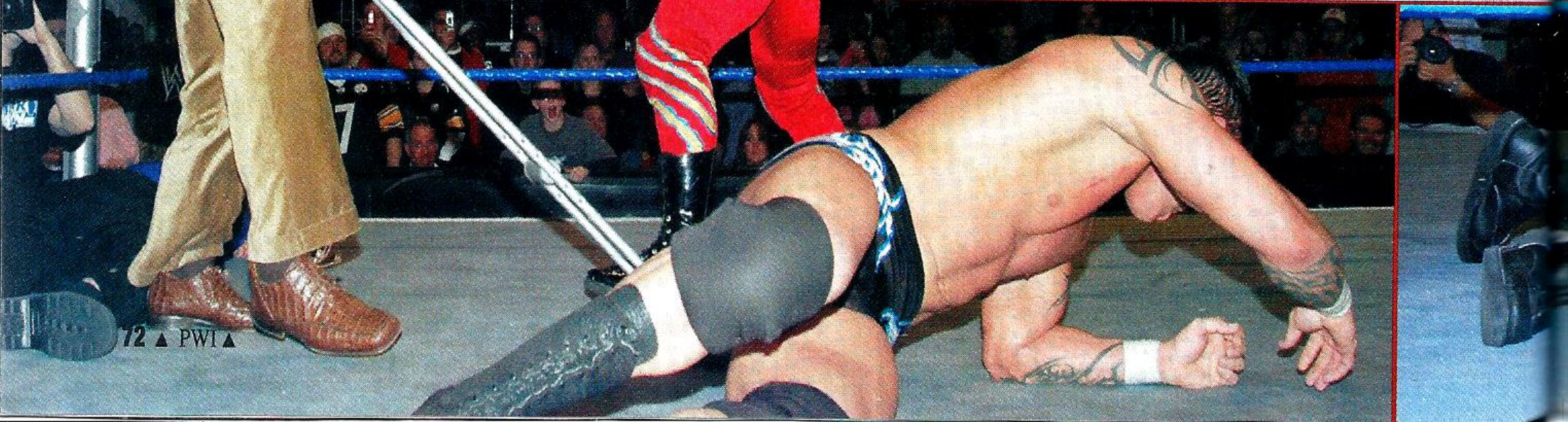
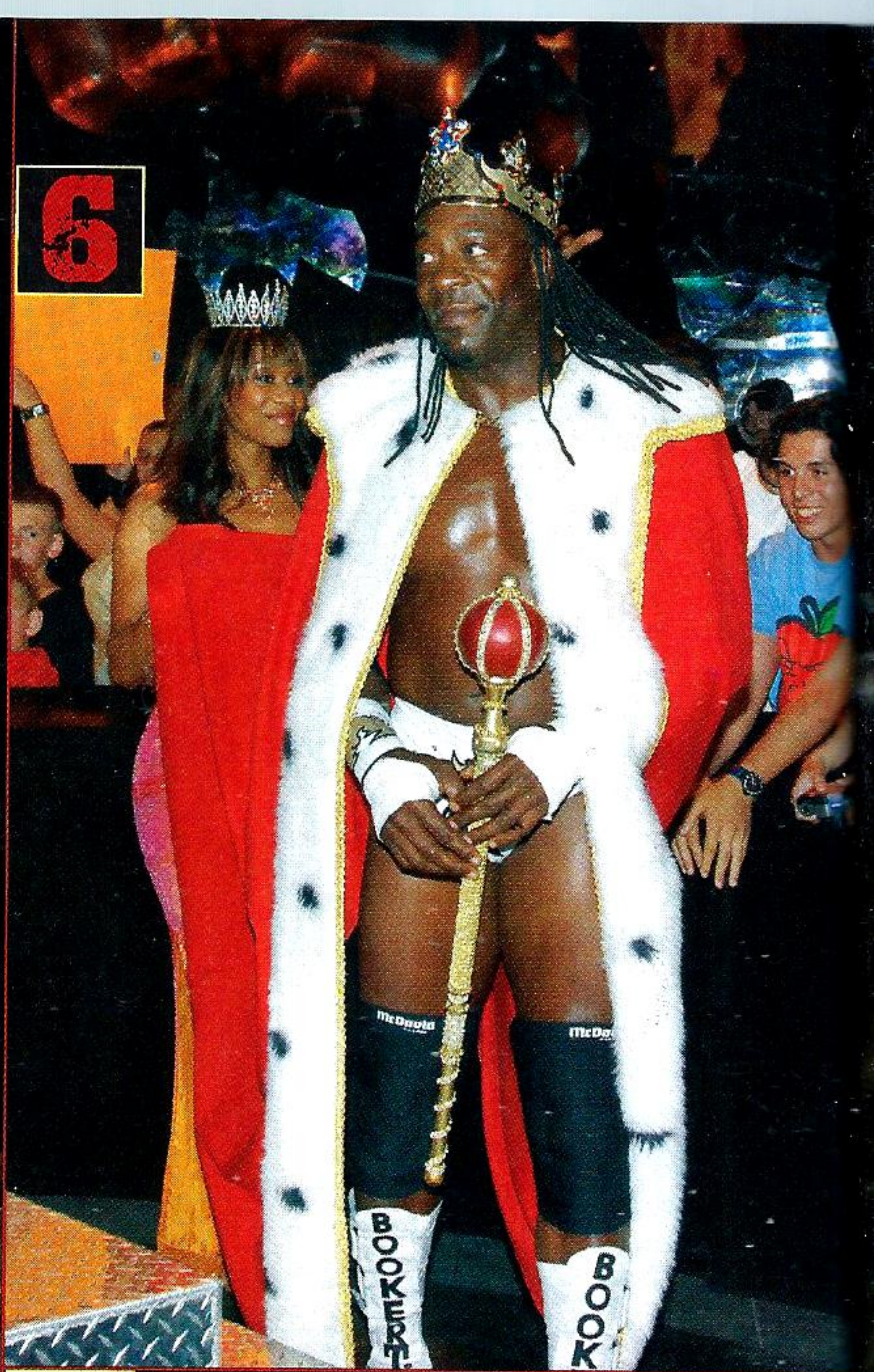
CAREER GROWTH: Booker is on the downside of a long and impressive wrestling career. He has opened his own training school in Texas and has to be thinking about his life beyond wrestling. That being said, Booker hasn't slipped a bit in the ring, even with the knee injury. The feud with the Boogeyman wasn't his proudest moment, but he bounced back strongly. With Randy Orton jumping to Raw and JBL becoming Smackdown's newest color commentator, Booker is one of the top two or three rulebreakers in the Friday night brand. **GRADE: B+**

OVERALL VALUE: Of all the former WCW competitors to jump to WWE since 2001, Booker T has had the most long-term impact. For five years, he has been a role player, always on the cusp of title contention. If he was to leave WWE tomorrow, it wouldn't cripple the company, but Booker adds much-needed depth to the roster, and very few others can match him in terms of in-ring ability and entertainment value. **GRADE: B+**



BOOKER T





CARLITO

CARIBBEAN COOL

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: It would have been hard for Carlito Caribbean Cool to match his grade in Goal Achievement last year (A) again this year. After all, he won the U.S. title in his very first match on *Smackdown* in October 2004, and then won the Intercontinental title in his first match on *Raw* in June 2005. Carlito spent several months teaming—and toying—with Chris Masters before the two finally split after WrestleMania 22. It took Carlito a little while to get back on track, but now he's once again contending for the I-C title, which is exactly where he should be at this stage of his career. **GRADE: B-**

MARKETABILITY: The buzz out of WWE headquarters is that the front office has big hopes for Carlito. Some people say he has that same sort of unique charisma that The Rock showed early in his

career, and you have to think the higher-ups are just salivating over the prospect of Carlito achieving just a fraction of the wrestler-turned-actor's success and popularity. Frankly, we're not convinced from a marketing standpoint. Carlito has potential, but he's a long way from The Rock in terms of marketability. Still, WWE keeps churning out new Carlito T-shirts, and people seem to be buying them. **GRADE: B**

REPERTOIRE: Last year, we gave Carlito a C in this category, simply because he hadn't shown us much more than basic brawling. Since then, he has introduced his a devastating backcracker and has shown some surprising aerial ability, turning triple-jumps up the turnbuckles into high-impact attacks. The truth is that we underestimated Carlito last year. He is a much more advanced wrestler than people give him credit for, and, that if he's smart, he still has a few moves in the bank that he'll use in key situations. **GRADE: B+**

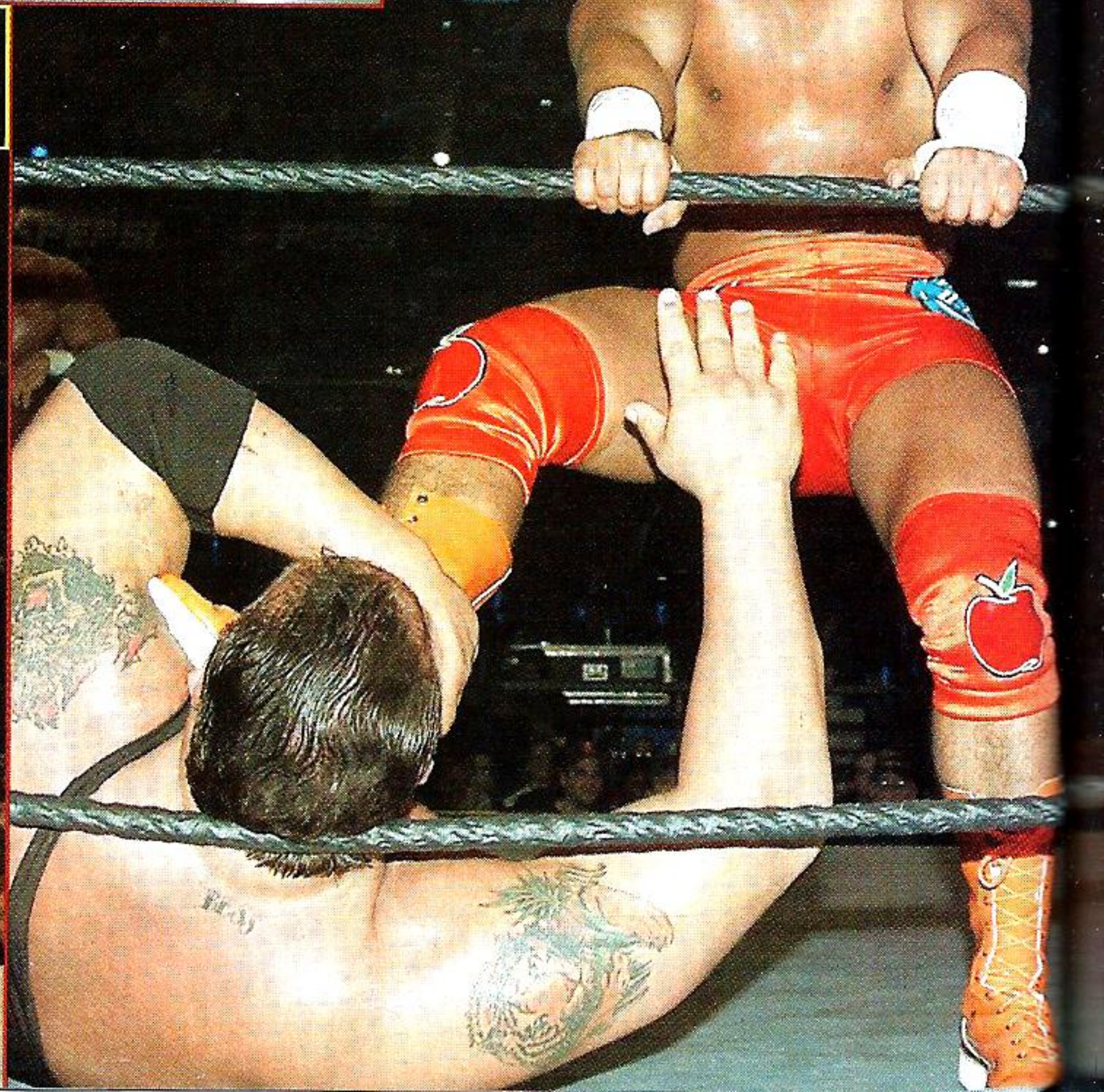
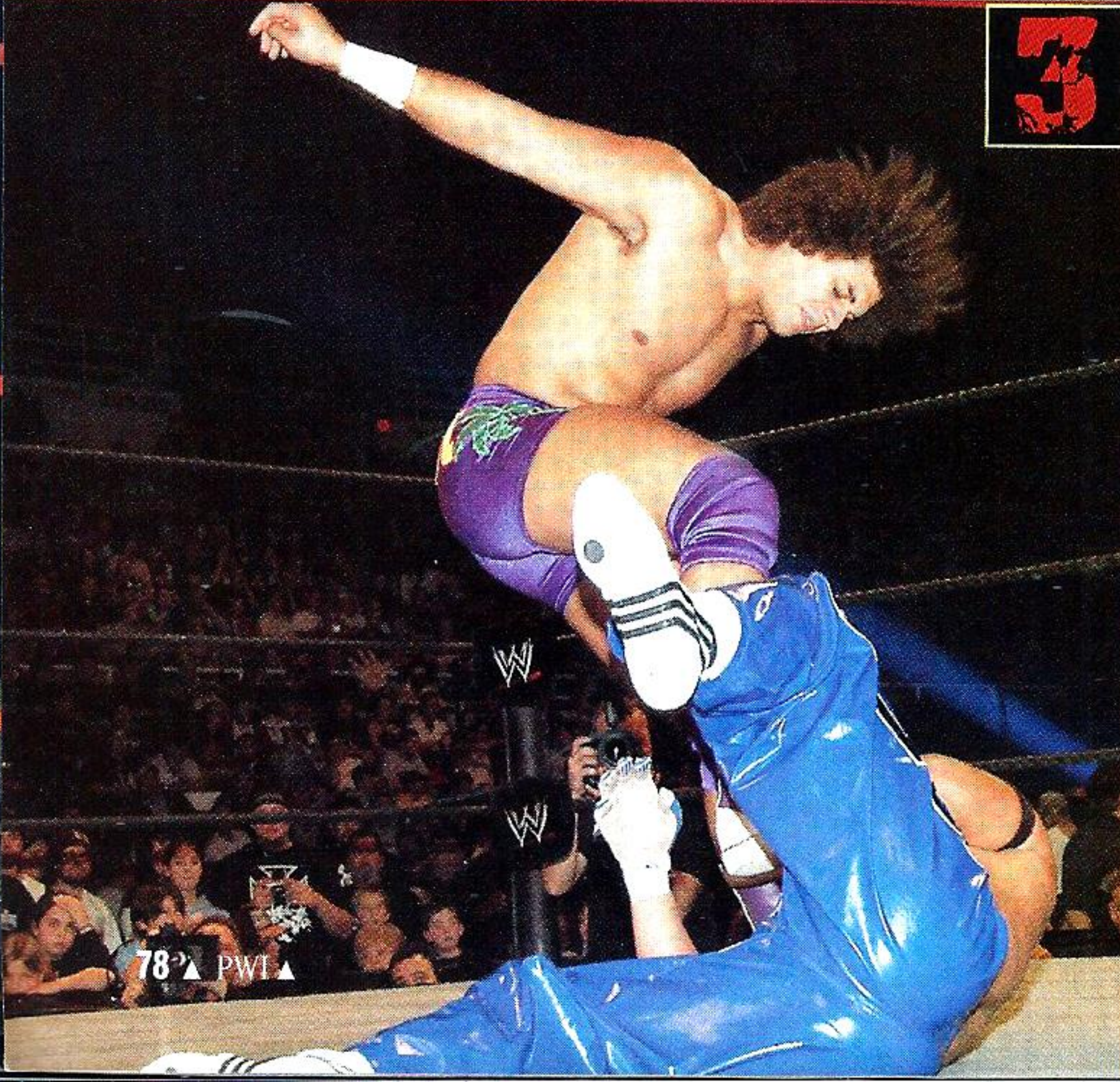
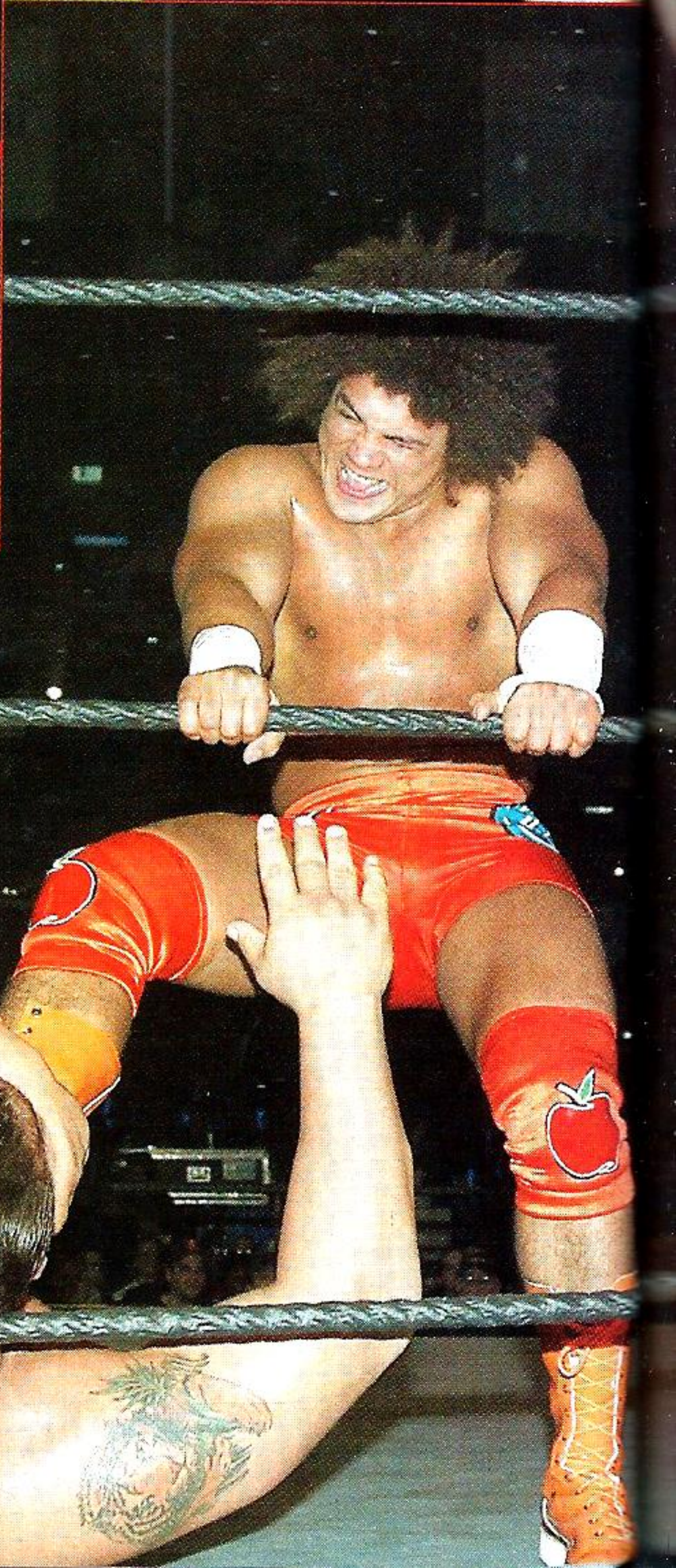
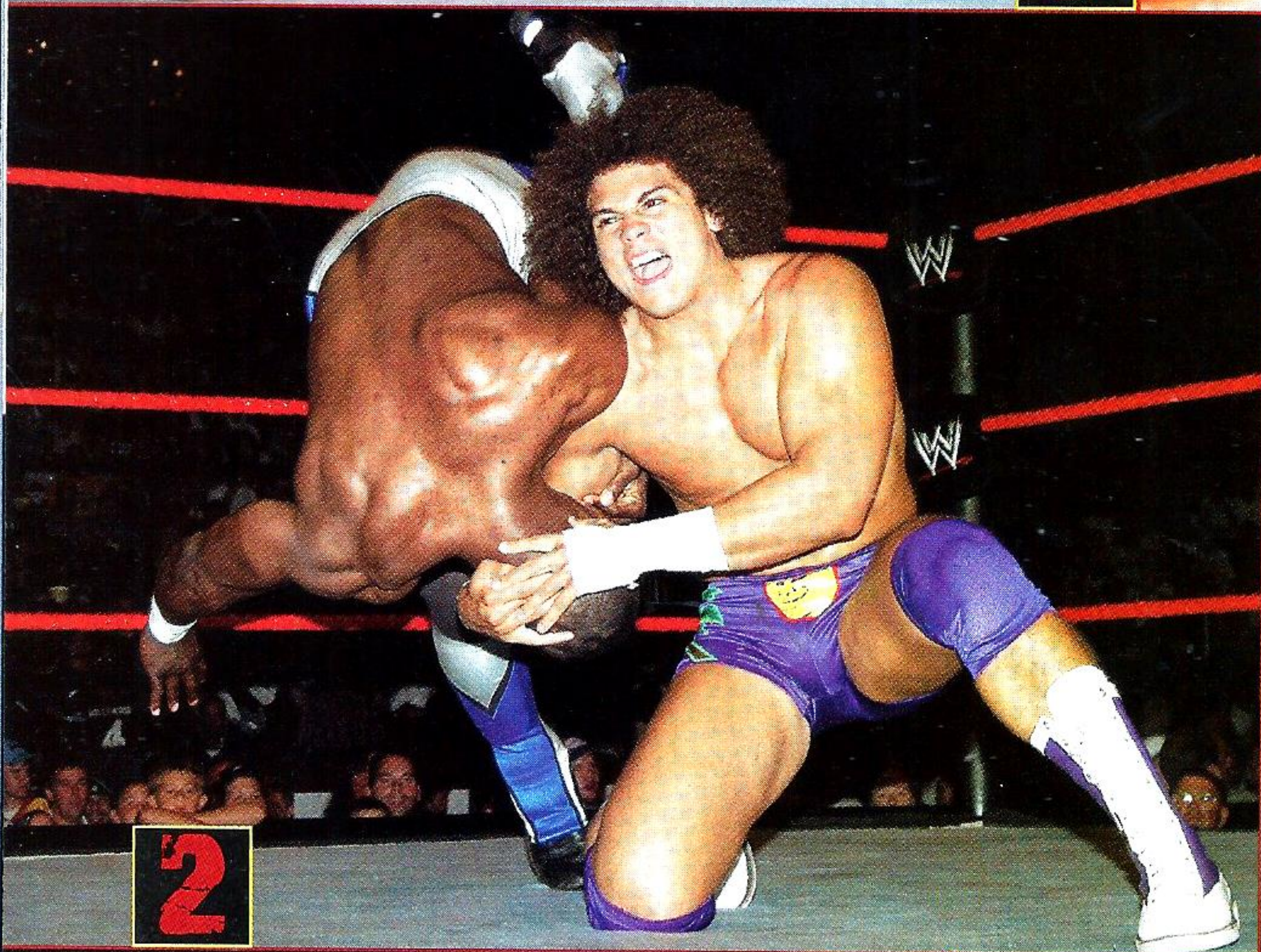
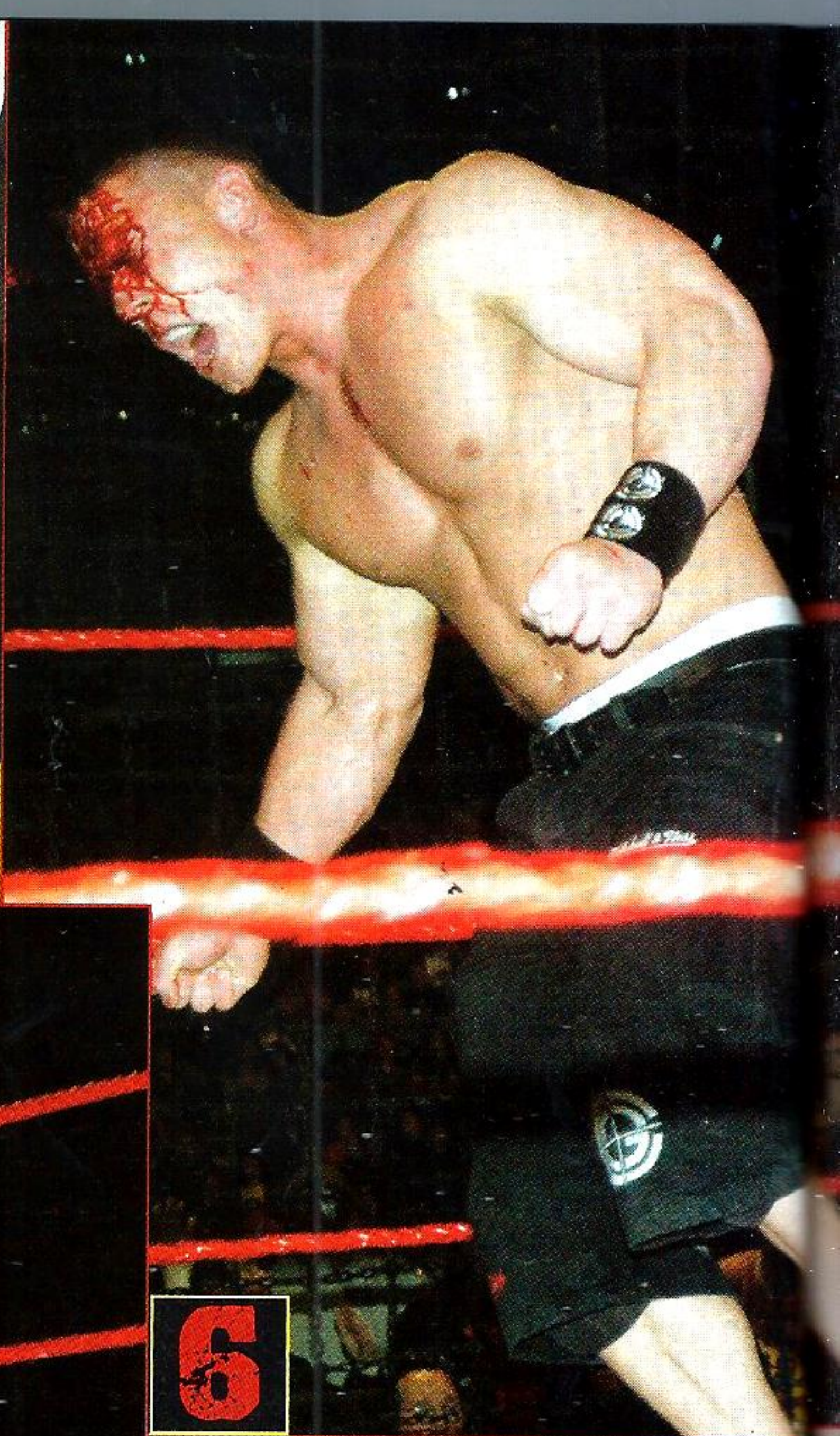
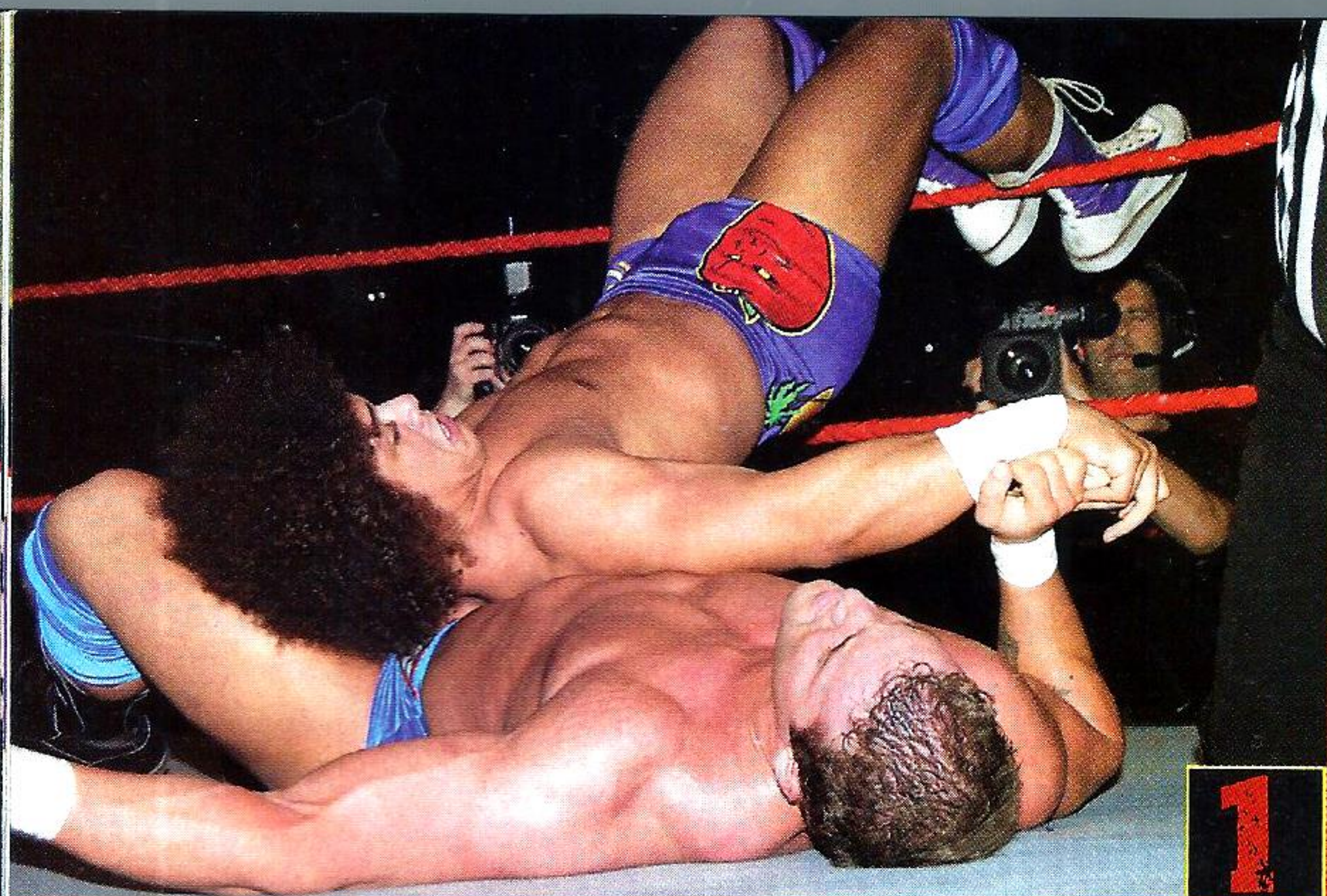
CAREER GROWTH: Aside from a few wasted months with Masters, Carlito seems to be on the right path to Raw World title contention. Actually, maybe "wasted" is the wrong word. That failed partnership with Masters forced Carlito to re-think his ways and begin wrestling as a fan favorite. Now he's starting to unleash his true potential, using actual wrestling moves instead of relying on cheating. Shortcuts can only take you so far. **GRADE: A-**

OVERALL VALUE: Carlito is one of WWE's better promo men and is steadily developing into one of the company's top in-ring talents as well. As the son of Puerto Rican wrestling legend Carlos Colon, Carlito has a built-in fan base within the Puerto Rican community that has largely gone untapped thus far. He looks like he could become one of WWE's breakout stars, and possibly even a world champion. **GRADE: B+**



CARLITO
CARIBBEAN COOL





CARLITO CARIBBEAN COOL



1 The stress of two massive egos fighting for superiority was the catalyst in the breakup of Carlito and Masters as a team. The two met at Backlash in April, with Carlito stealing the win.

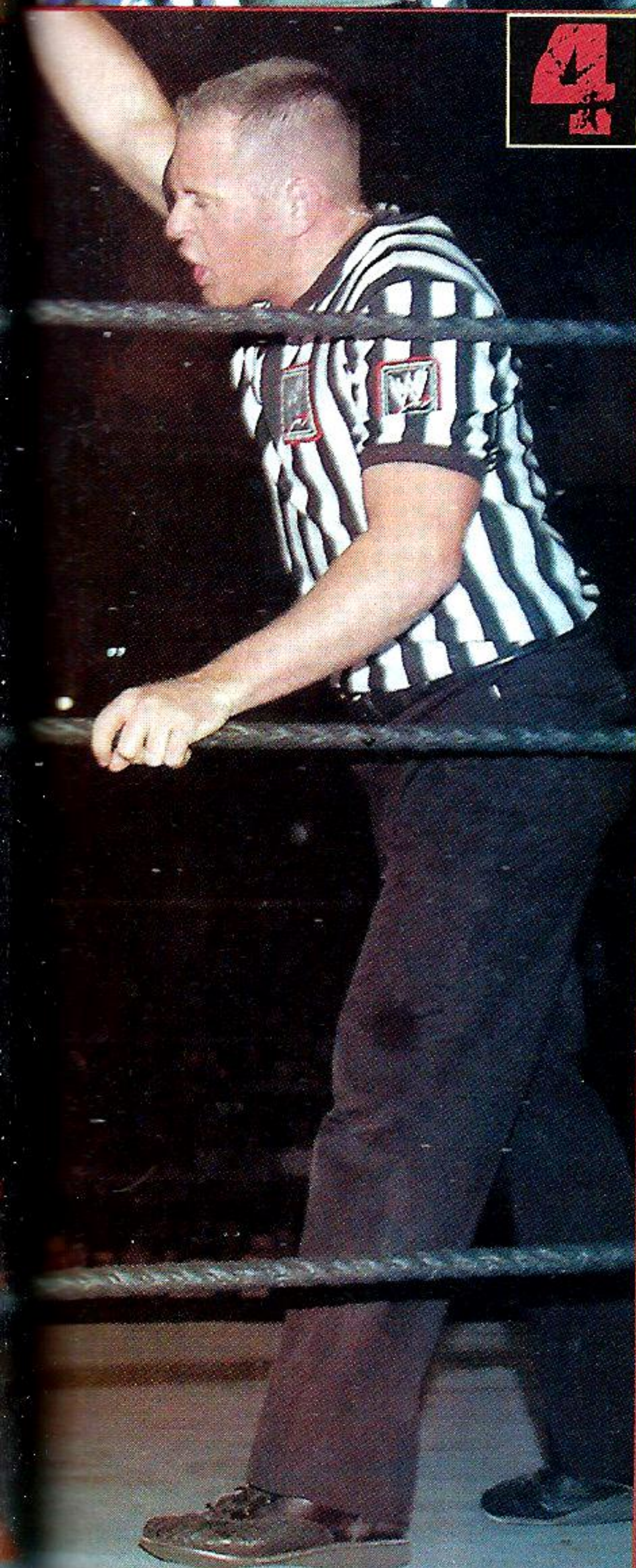
2 Having once held Intercontinental gold before, Carlito again entered the title picture as he attempted to separate Shelton Benjamin from the I-C strap in mid-2006.

3 It became evident as to just how valuable Carlito Caribbean Cool was to WWE when the newcomer—with a strong cult following—was added to the Raw roster in mid-2005 and won the Intercontinental title in his first match on Monday night.

4 WrestleMania 22 saw Carlito and Masters unsuccessfully challenge The Big Show and Kane for the Raw World tag team title.

5 Carlito's stock continued to rise with Raw when he was added to the main event—a five man "Elimination Chamber" match—at New Year's Revolution.

6 Proving that when world gold is on the line it truly is "every man for himself," Carlito "accidentally" lowblows then-partner Chris Masters at New Years Revolution.



CHRISTOPHER DANIELS

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: In last year's report card, we challenged Christopher Daniels to take the next step and make a run for the NWA World title. He still hasn't made that move, and, after 13 years in the sport, we're beginning to wonder if he ever will. Unless he takes action, he could become pro wrestling's answer to Ernie Banks, one of the greatest players to ever fail to win a world championship. He's put on some classic matches against A.J. Styles and Samoa Joe (including his Ultimate X win), and won the NWA World tag title with Styles. But he can still do more—and everyone knows it. **GRADE: B-**

MARKETABILITY: Homemade "Best Of" Christopher Daniels videotapes are a cottage industry among the so-called smart fans. In fact, "Best Of" and "Christopher Daniels" are almost redundant. Anytime Daniels climbs into the ring, you can pretty much be assured you're going to see a great match—whether it's in TNA, ROH, or Japan. Daniels is one of the most charismatic wrestlers in the game. He's also got a great winged ankh logo that looks perfect on a T-shirt, especially for the Goth crowd. **GRADE: A**

REPERTOIRE: Last year, we wrote, "Daniels' moveset reads like an encyclopedia of wrestling." That's still true, but "The Fallen Angel" has added an appendix or two since then. Actually, he had to. Elite wrestlers improve when they face elite competition, and Daniels was forced to elevate his game when he ran headlong into the

"Samoa Submission Machine" Samoa Joe. Look past the "Best Moonsault Ever," "The Last Rites," and the "Angel's Wings" and you'll find his cobra clutch overhead sit-out slam, his sitting quebrada, his top rope sidewalk slam ... and then there's his entire Curry Man moveset he'll tap into from time to time. Few know more than Daniels. **GRADE: A+**

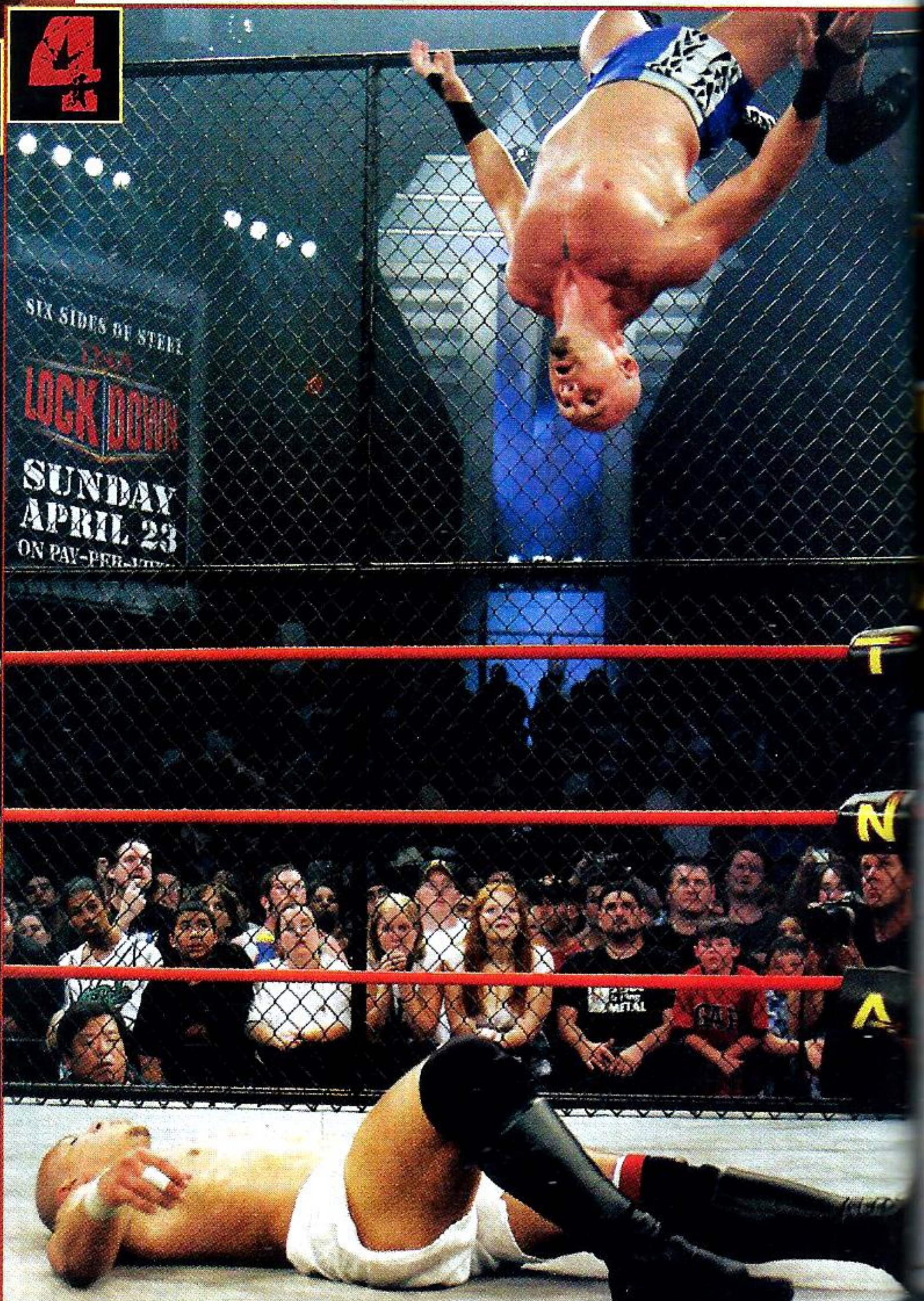
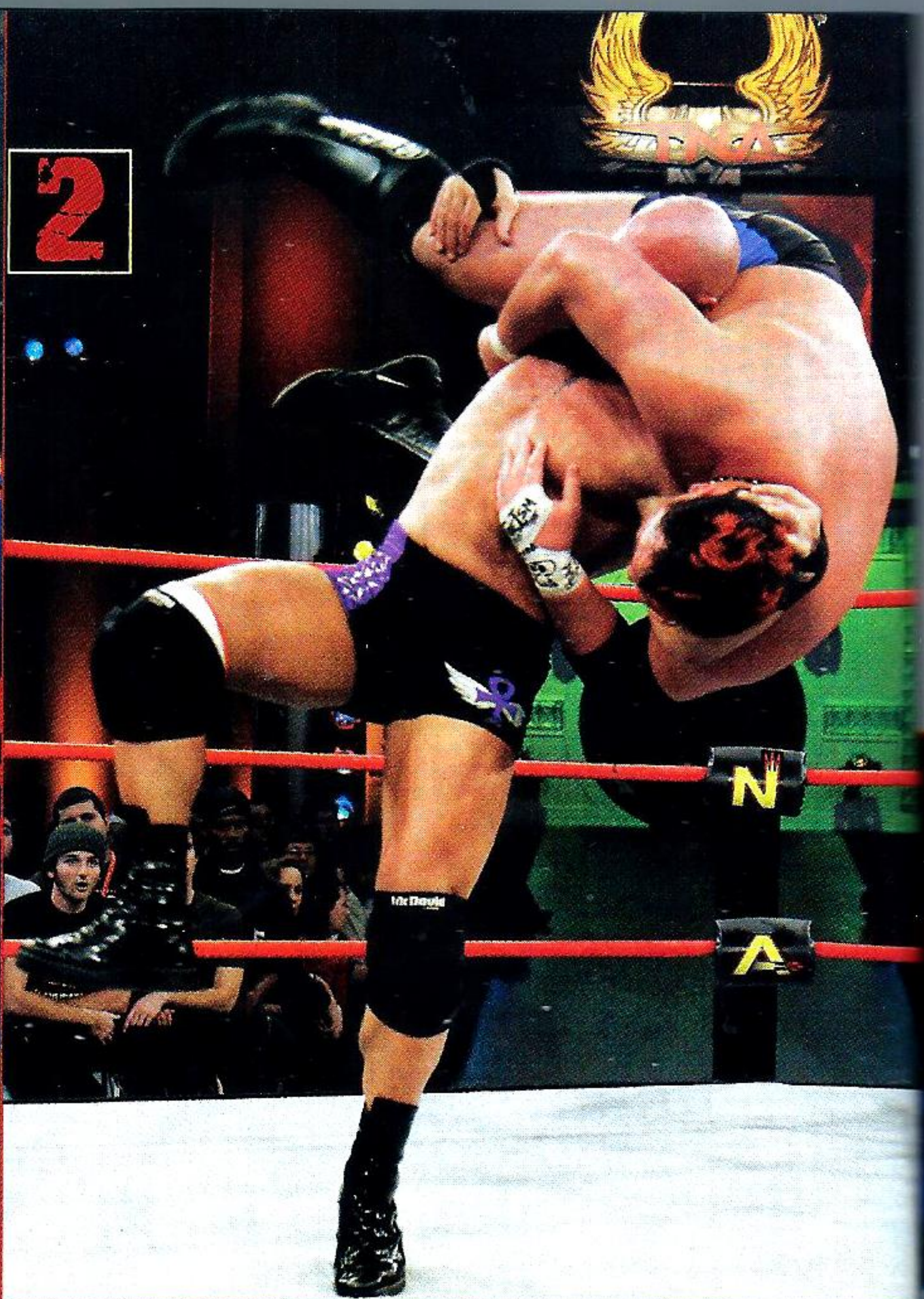
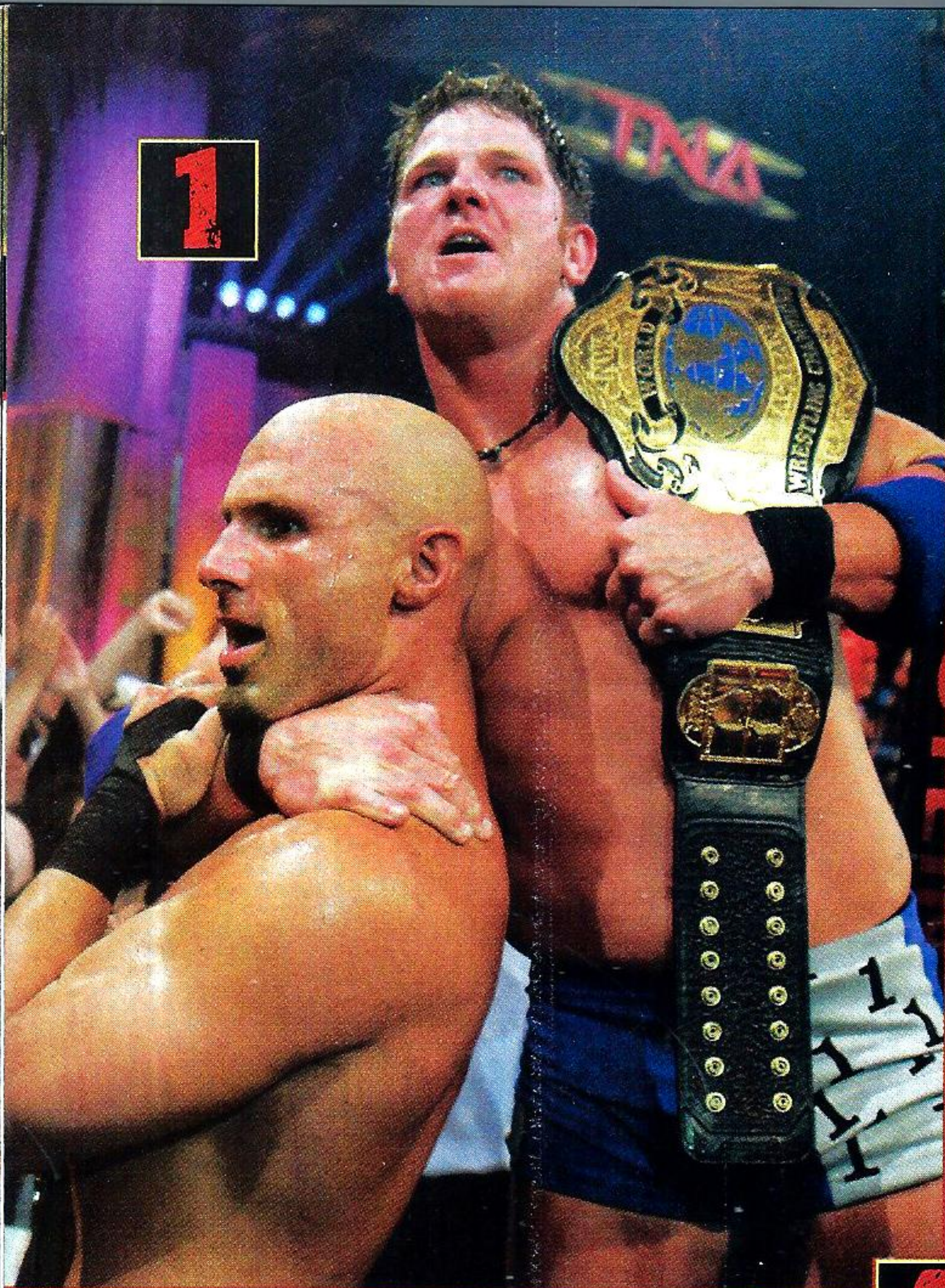
CAREER GROWTH: March 2003. That was the first time Daniels won the NWA World tag title, along with Low-Ki. Almost 3½ years have passed since then, and it's awfully hard to get excited about another tag team title win when, after all this time, he hasn't gotten any closer to the ultimate prize—the NWA World title. That's why we're dropping him a full letter grade this year, from B to C. If he's in the same position *next* year, we won't even be that kind. **GRADE: C**

OVERALL VALUE: Daniels is selfless to a fault. He is versatile, enthusiastic, and immensely talented. Basically, he's a promoter's dream. Put him in the opening match and he'll set the tone for the night. Put him in the tag team division and watch things heat up. Stick him in the main event, and you might just end up with a Match of the Year candidate. He'll put his own aspirations aside for the good of the promotion, and that sort of dedication is very, very rare. Daniels is the unsung hero of TNA. Hopefully, that dedication will eventually lead to a NWA title push some time soon. **GRADE: B+**



CHRISTOPHER
DANIELS





CHRISTOPHER DANIELS

1 Styles and Daniels captured the NWA World tag straps at Slammiversary in June, making Daniels the first man to hold two different titles for TNA in 2006.

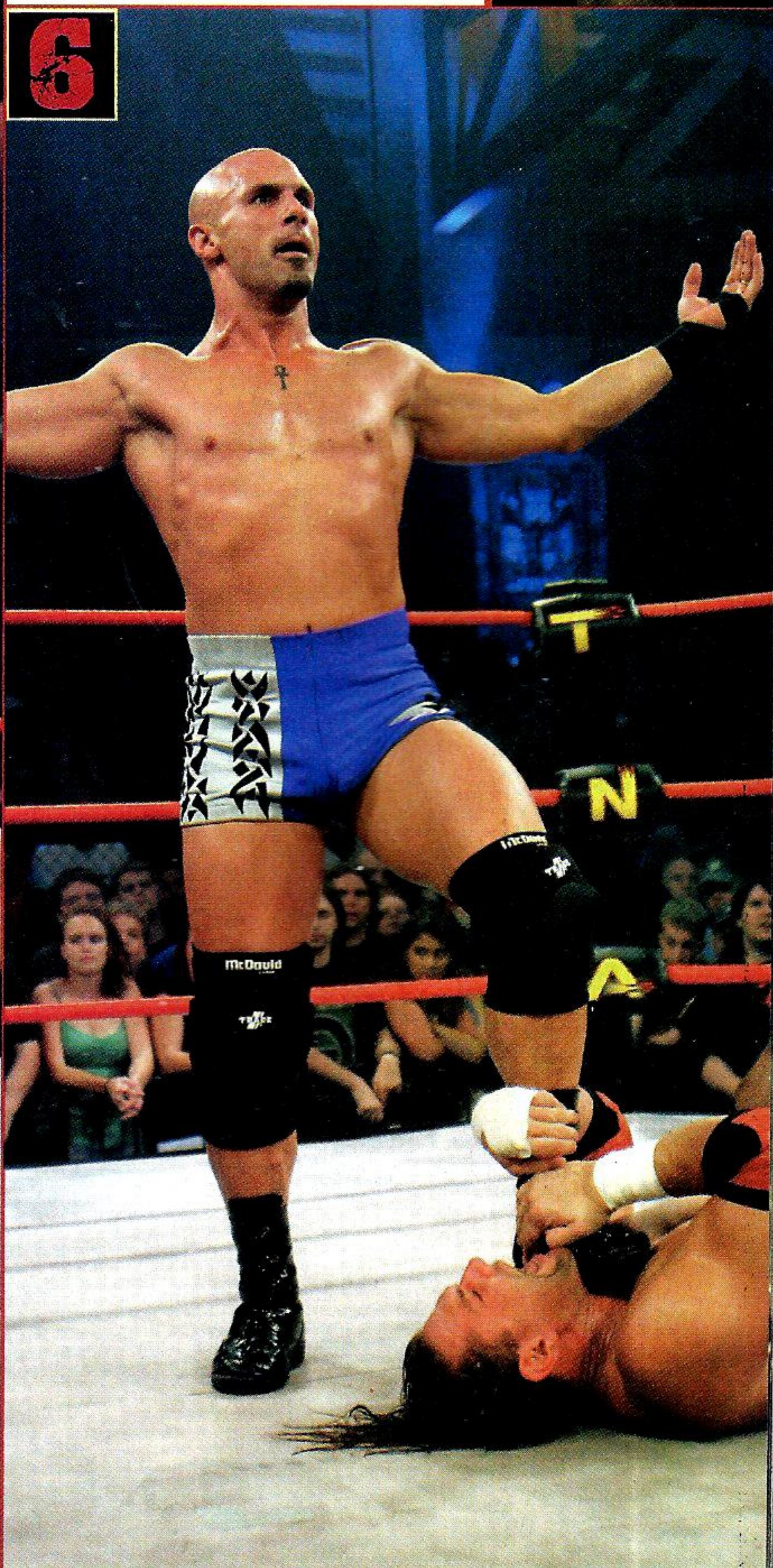
2 Christopher Daniels has adapted his wrestling style to best accommodate whatever situation he faces. However, as far as Samoa Joe is concerned, Daniels seems to raise his game to an even higher level.

3 Daniels' tenacity and ring experience paid off, as he was able to take the X title from Samoa Joe in a three-way Ultimate X match (with A.J. Styles) at Destination X.

4 The addition of Senshi to the X division provided for some entertaining matchups in mid-2006. While unable to defeat him, Daniels provided the greatest opposition to Senshi at Lockdown.

5 How good was the Daniels-Joe rivalry? So good that TNA used an X title match between the two as the premiere contest when it moved *Impact* to Thursday nights.

6 Daniels' career went in a different direction in mid-2006 when he and A.J. Styles paired-up to feud with then-NWA World tag team champions America's Most Wanted.



RIC FLAIR

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: The past year has been a rough one for the "Nature Boy." He lost to Triple-H in a grueling "Last Man Standing" match at the 2005 Survivor Series. His wife filed for divorce, his marital problems became fodder for the tabloids, and he was arrested on assault charges following an alleged road rage incident. But Flair also managed to once again prove his critics wrong by holding the Intercontinental title for an impressive five months and putting forth impressive efforts in a "TLC" match against Edge on *Raw* and in the "Money-In-The-Bank" ladder match at WrestleMania 22. Flair has slowed down a few steps, but his accomplishments during the past year are impressive—especially for a 57-year-old man whose personal life has been in turmoil. **GRADE: B+**

MARKETABILITY: Flair is right up there with Hulk Hogan, The Rock, and Steve Austin as one of the most marketable wrestlers of all-time, but his image took a bit of a hit in 2005, following his arrest and allega-

tions of drug use and domestic violence from his estranged wife. It may take a while for mainstream audiences to warm back up to the "Nature Boy," but, as far as wrestling fans are concerned, "Slick" Ric is the *real* wrestling god. **GRADE: A-**

REPERTOIRE: If we were to list all of the moves Flair has used, it would take up this whole "Report Card" ... and that would only bring us to 1982. When Flair says he has forgotten more moves than most wrestlers ever learn, that's not a boast—it's a statement of fact. **GRADE: A+**

CAREER GROWTH: We've said it many times before, but once again it feels like Flair is closing out his glorious career. He's done it all. He may still want one last run as world champion, but, at this stage of his career, that's unlikely at best. Maybe we're wrong (Flair has proven us wrong more times than we care to remember), but this feels like the end. The Flair we remember wouldn't get dominated by Umaga—espe-

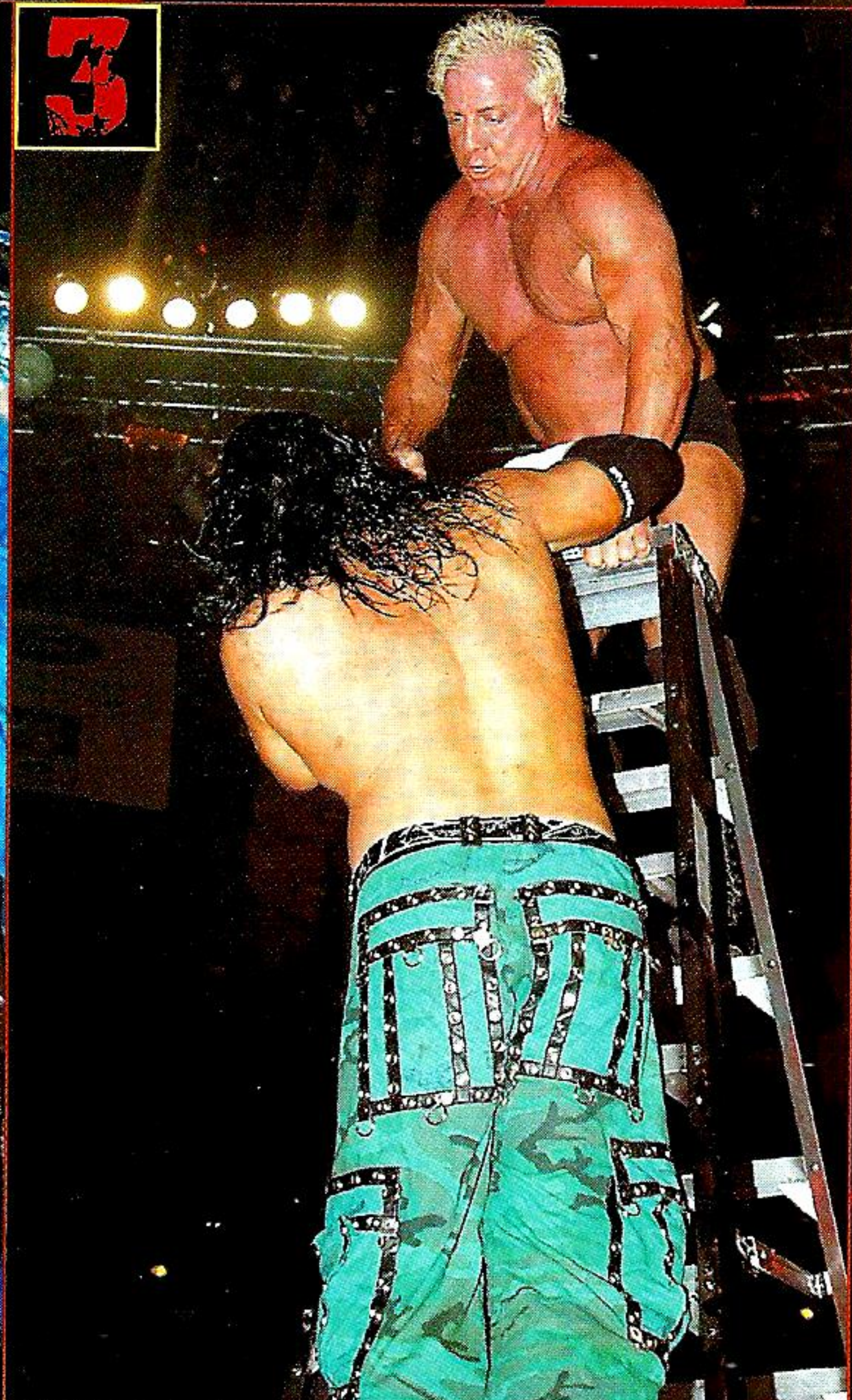
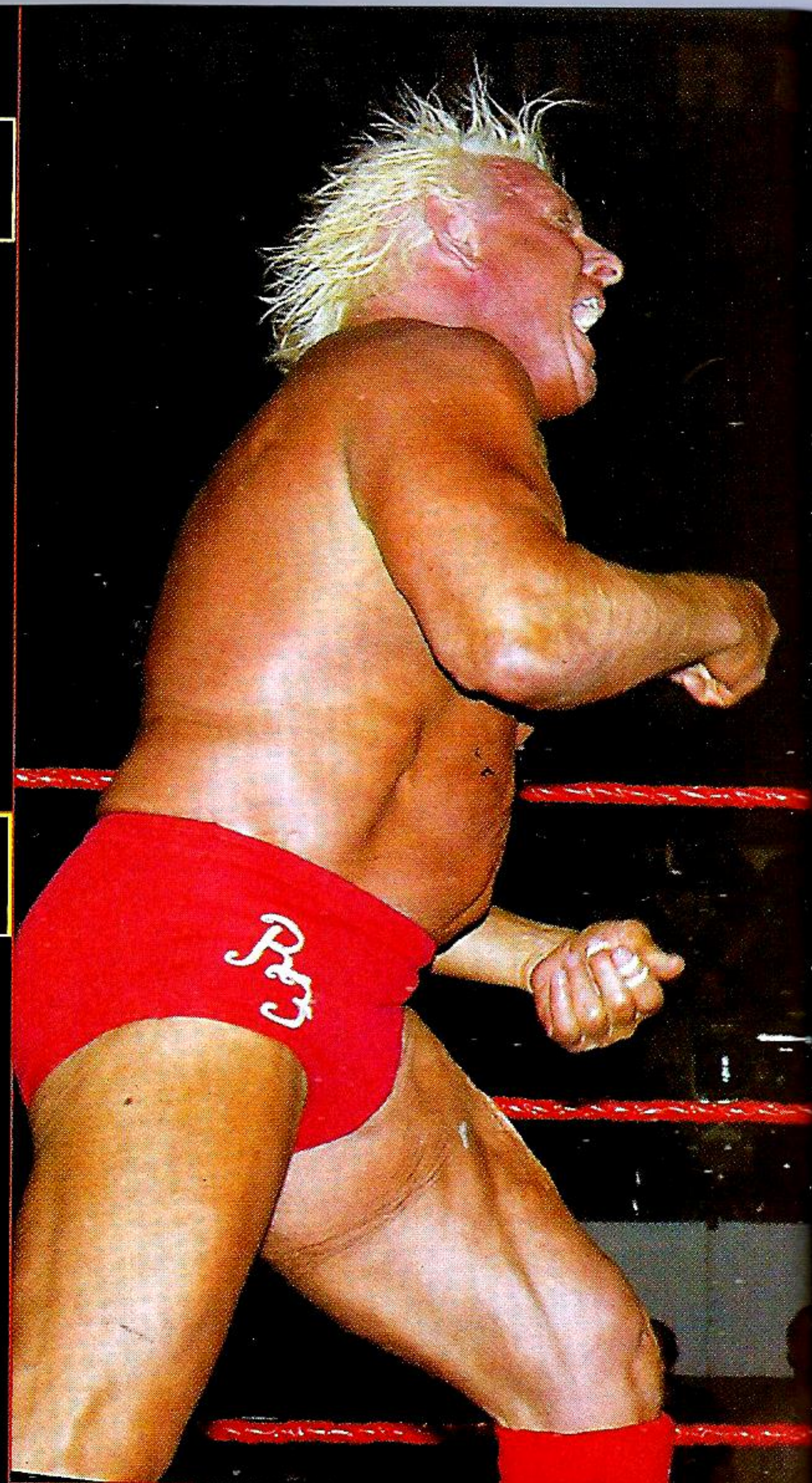
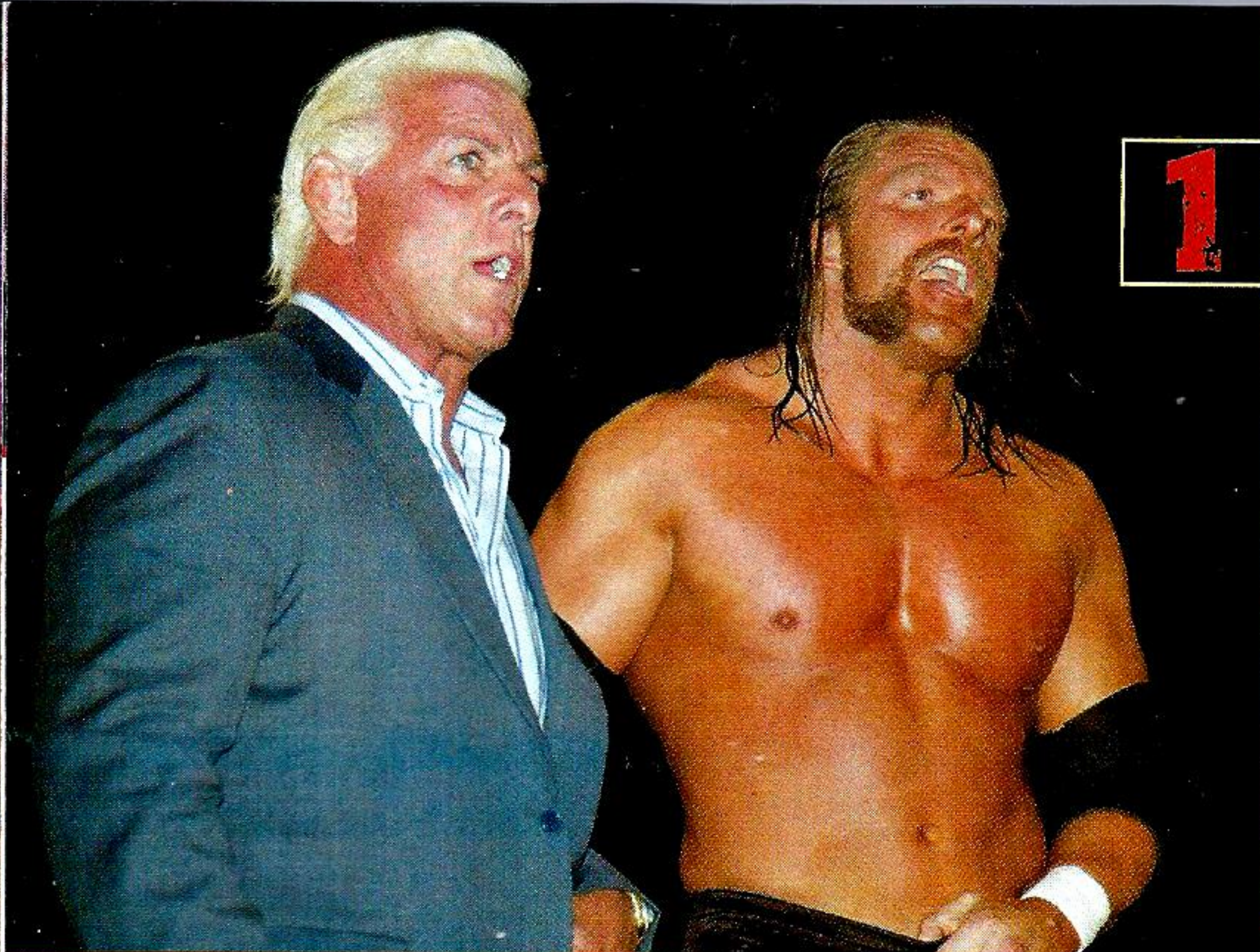
cially less than a year after going toe-to-toe with Triple-H. He's definitely taken a step backward. **GRADE: C**

OVERALL VALUE: There are still some big money matches for Flair. His current feud with Mick Foley is intriguing. A legends match against Hogan or Dusty Rhodes could be great for WrestleMania 23. Maybe Rick Steamboat could even be persuaded to climb back into the ring for one more match. He's still a great interview, and he still has a niche in WWE. But, at this stage, it's very apparent that Flair needs WWE more than WWE needs him. And, for a wrestler of Flair's caliber, it's a little sad to see. **GRADE: B+**



RIC
FLAIR







6

1 Ric Flair must have set quite the example for protégé Triple-H. "The Game" turned against Flair in late 2005, leaving the former world champion to fend for himself.

2 At the age of 56, Ric Flair won his first WWE Intercontinental championship. The "Nature Boy" defended the strap during the beginning of 2006, eventually losing the title to Shelton Benjamin.

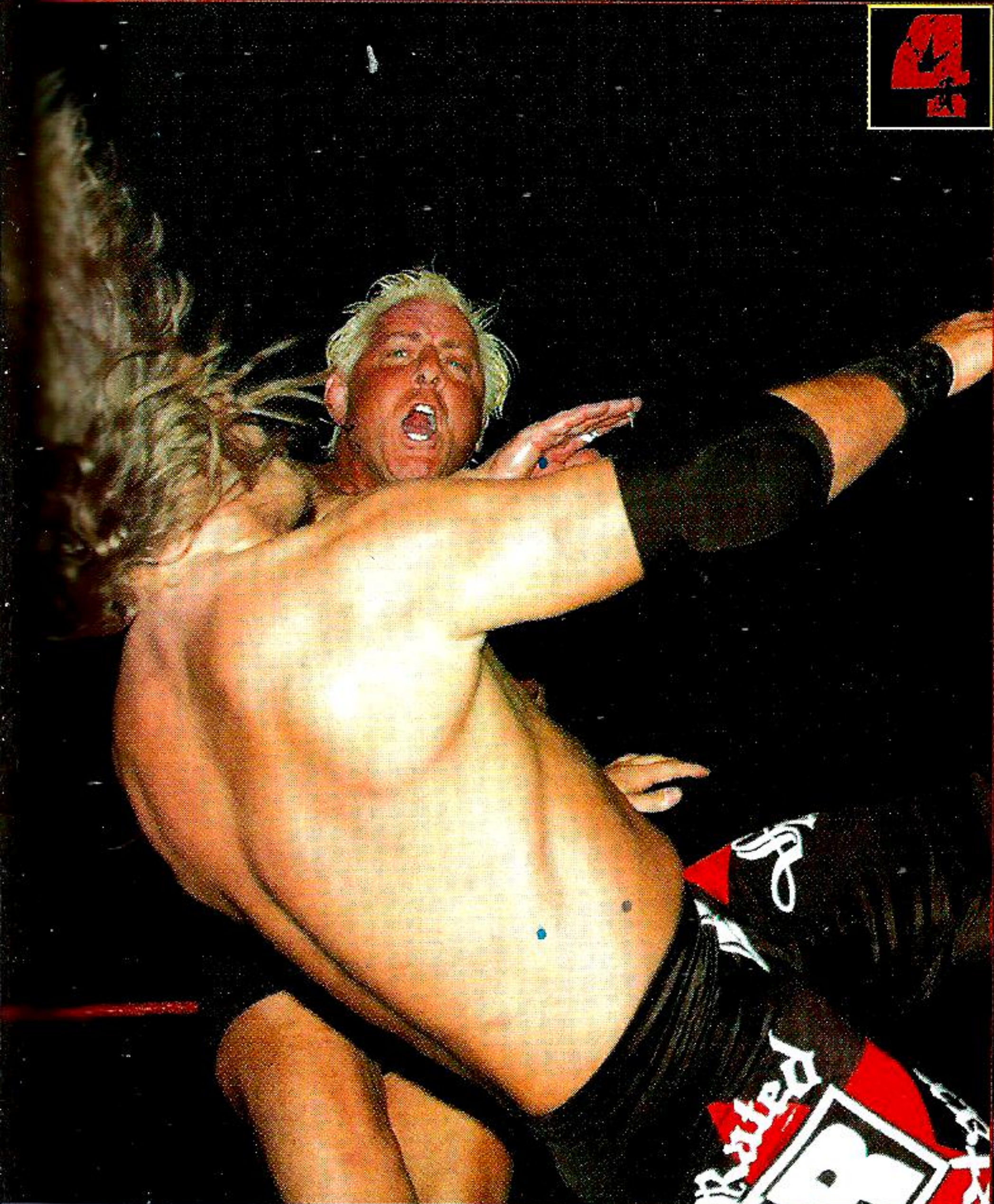
3 At WrestleMania 22, Flair shocked the fans by competing in the "Money-In-The-Bank" ladder match for a guaranteed shot at a world title.

4 For a brief period of time, Flair was engaged in a nasty feud with Edge. The two would battle in a surprisingly intense ladder match for Edge's Raw World title.

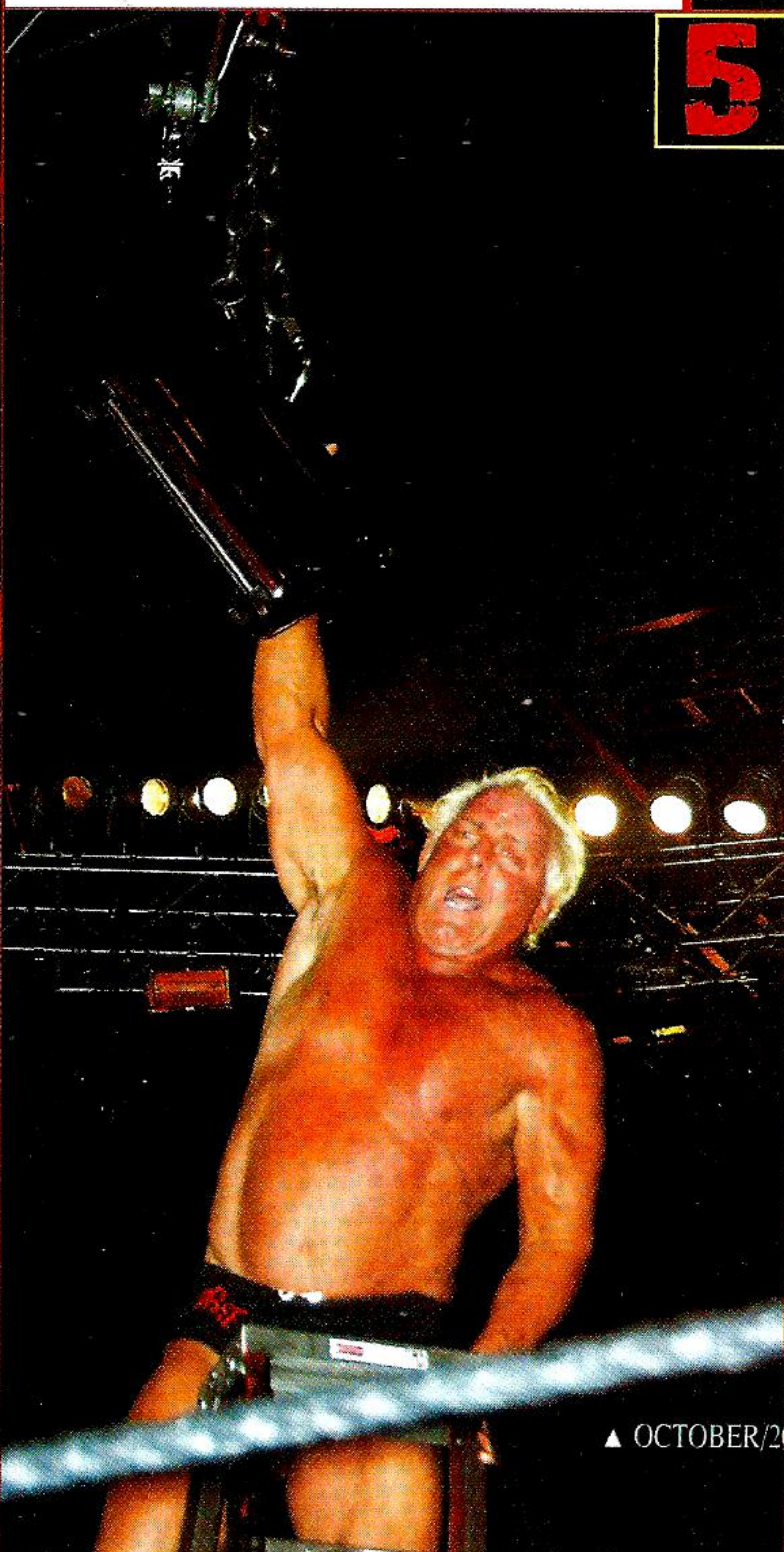
5 Flair was mere inches from ensuring himself a world championship match at some point in 2006. Unfortunately, he not only missed that opportunity, but he also spent much of the year injured.

6 Flair provided the only test for the massive Umaga thus far. Still, "The Samoan Bulldozer" made quick work of the legend.

RIC FLAIR



4



5

THE JAMES GANG

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: B.G. and Kip James have finally hit their stride after far too much putzing around with how Kip fit in with the 3 Live Kru. The former New Age Outlaws are at their best when they're causing trouble and chasing tag titles. The James Gang has also gotten back to what they do best, wrestling a rougher, more aggressive style in their war against Team 3D. A few years have passed since their heyday as part of DeGeneration X, but The James Gang has regained their championship form. All that's left is to win the NWA World tag title. **GRADE: B+**

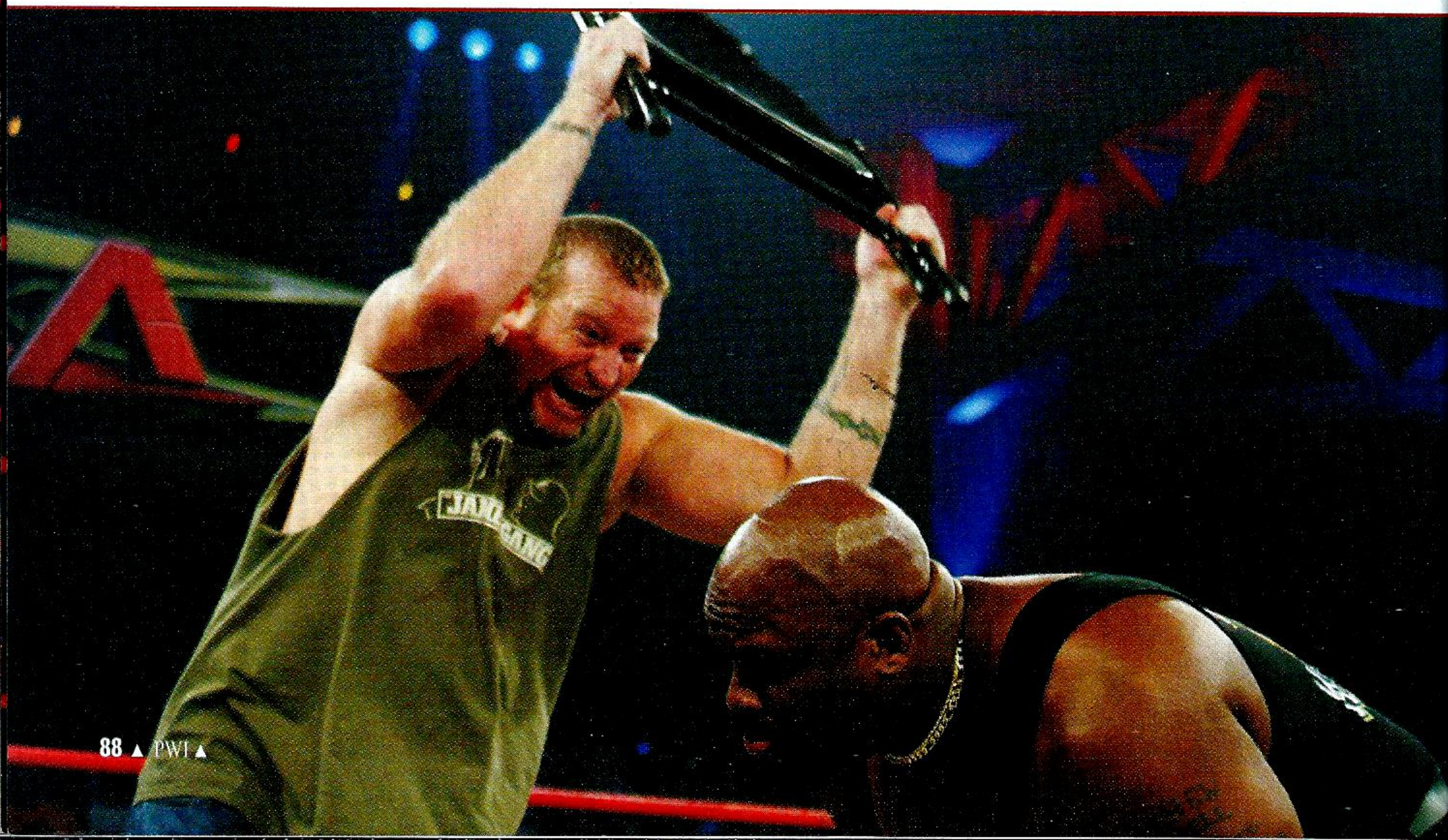
MARKETABILITY: Back when they were a part of DX, Kip and B.G. (then known as The Road Dogg and Billy Gunn) were two of the most marketable characters in wrestling. While they're still entertaining, B.G. and Kip have lost some of their edge in TNA. The name "The James Gang" conjures up images of old Westerns, not a hip young tag team like "The New Age Outlaws" did. The James boys are still pretty rowdy, but they're not doing their crotch chops or yelling "Suck it." That may have been rude and crude, but it sold an awful lot of T-shirts. **GRADE: B-**

REPERTOIRE: The former New Age Outlaws have never been what you would call tacticians. They are savvy veteran brawlers whose individual styles nicely

complement one another. Kip is the team's power merchant, and second-generation grappler B.G. is the team's ring general. They can get the job done any number of ways, and, unlike far too many wrestlers in the sport today, they don't care about winning pretty—they just care about winning. **GRADE: B+**

CAREER GROWTH: Kip and B.G. are finally making way in TNA, and the stars are starting to align. Their old compatriots, Triple-H and Shawn Michaels, have resurrected the DX name, and all things DX are hot again. If Kip and B.G. can take advantage of that synchronicity, they might just be able to ignite their own brand of DX fever in TNA. And let's face it: Kip and B.G. are better off together (and associated even indirectly with the DX name) than they could ever be apart. Everything seems to be coming together. **GRADE: A**

OVERALL VALUE: A few years ago, The New Age Outlaws were almost household names, highly featured during wrestling's 1990s "Golden Age." Like Sting, TNA can continue to leverage their renown to draw new viewers to the TNA product, where they can hopefully get hooked on the X division or the NWA World title scene. The James Gang is the flashy lure, the X division is the hook that catches the fans. It's an ideal role for them. **GRADE: B+**



THE
JAMES GANG



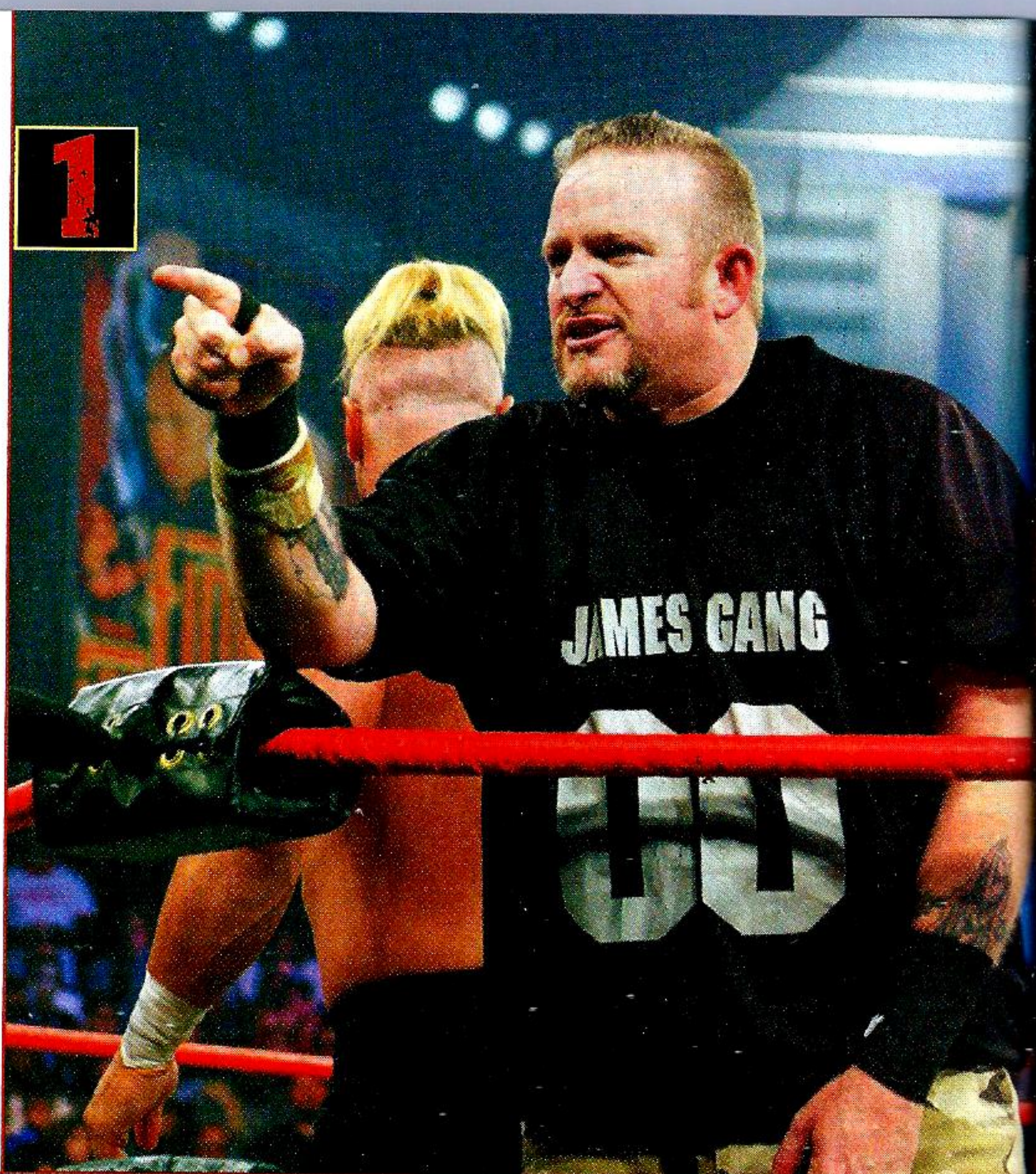
THE JAMES GANG

1 Kip and B.G. James forged their own path after a failed attempt to successfully expand 3Live Kru. The duo enjoyed tremendous success together in WWE.

2 The Jameses and Team 3D have engaged in what promises to be a classic battle between two of the greatest tandems in the history of the sport.

3 Kip James' arrival at TNA was an uneasy one to say the least. His presence was the primary factor in the demise of the once powerful 3Live Kru faction.

4 The always jovial James Gang did not stray far from their degenerate roots, spoofing opponents Team 3D in a sketch that was very reminiscent of the early days of their careers.



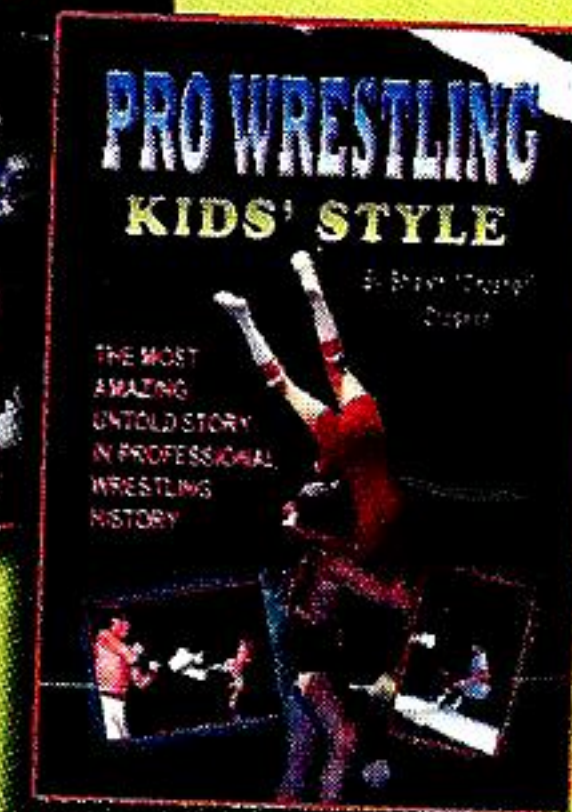
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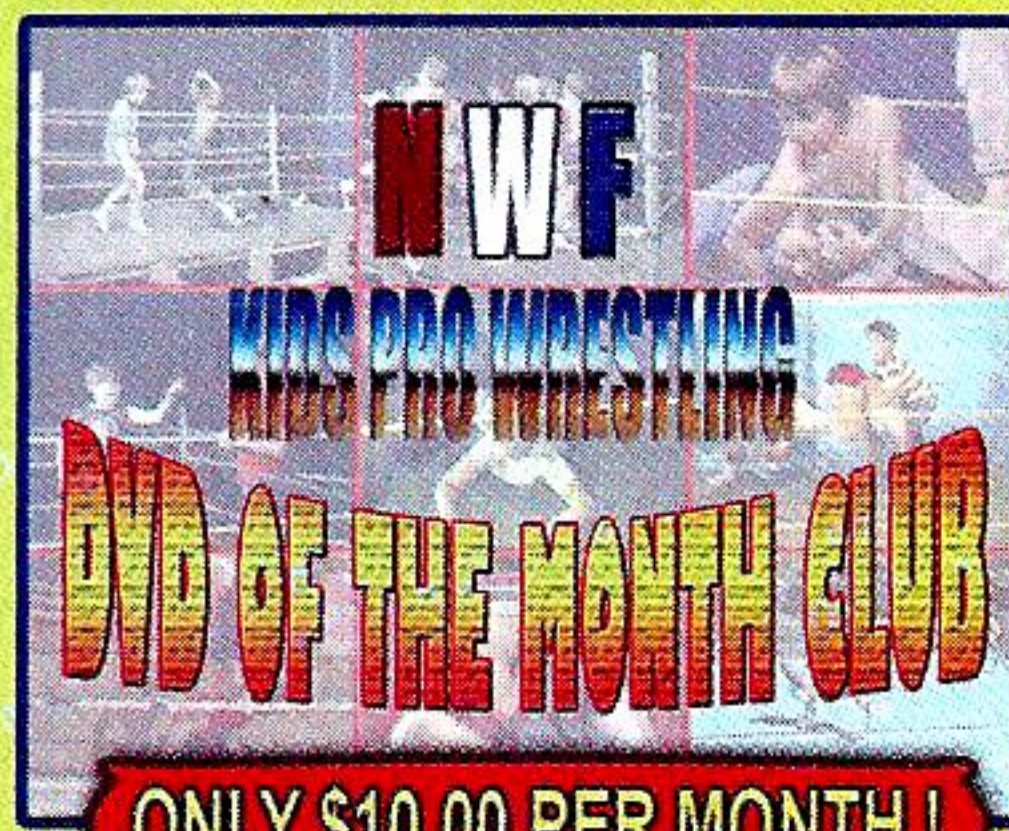
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STING

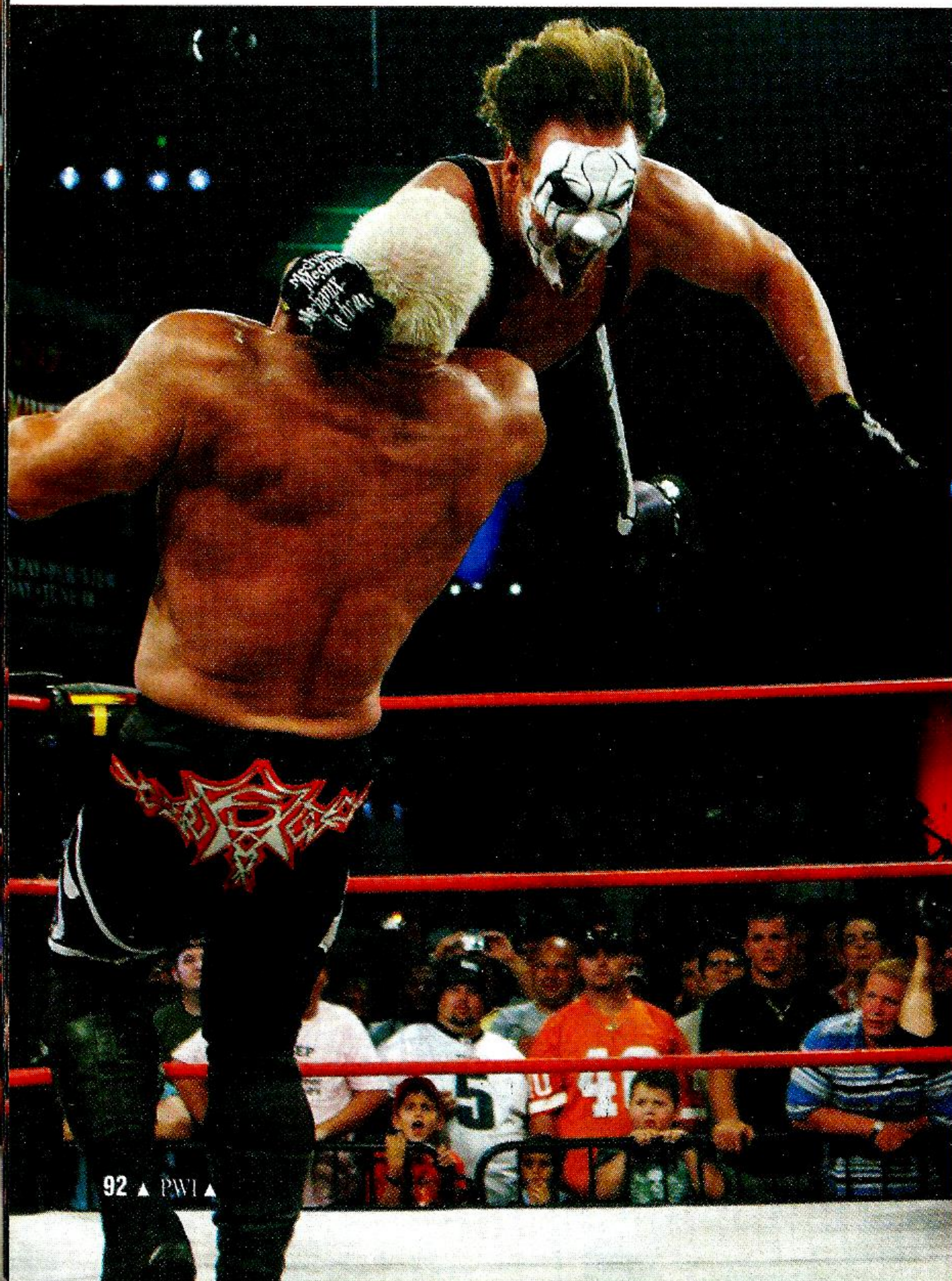
GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: It's hard to tell what Sting had in mind when he signed on with TNA. The company treated his arrival like it was the start of a new era for the company. Then Sting went and announced his retirement, saying he came back for the sole purpose of saying goodbye to his fans. If Jeff Jarrett hadn't sent Alex Shelley out to stalk Steve Borden and his family, would Sting have come back to TNA? We assume so because he signed a full contract instead of a one-match deal, but we're not positive. And if we can't tell if Sting intended for this comeback to be long-term or short-term, we can't really identify his goals, let alone give them an honest evaluation. We're giving him a B, because his comeback—planned or not—has gone so well thus far. **GRADE: B**

MARKETABILITY: The Stinger was one of the most marketable stars during the wrestling boom of the late-1990s, and he's still a recognizable figure. However, the jury's still out as to whether mainstream fans would see him as a top star, or whether they'd see him as yesterday's news. To his credit, Sting is still in great shape, but he's in his mid-40s now. He doesn't command the marketing power he did in 1996, but he's still a boon to TNA. **GRADE: B-**

REPERTOIRE: Sting has never been a wrestling wizard, but he's always been able to find a way to win. He doesn't quite get as low with his Scorpion deathlock as he did back in the day, and he doesn't quite get the same height on his Stinger splash, but both have still proved effective in TNA. When Sting adopted his Crow face paint, he also added the Scorpion deathdrop to his repertoire. Now that he has entered a new phase in his career in TNA, maybe he should consider adding another high-impact maneuver to his moveset. A lot of his TNA opponents literally grew up watching him wrestle. Changing things up a bit with some new moves would be a good idea, but hardly crucial. **GRADE: A-**

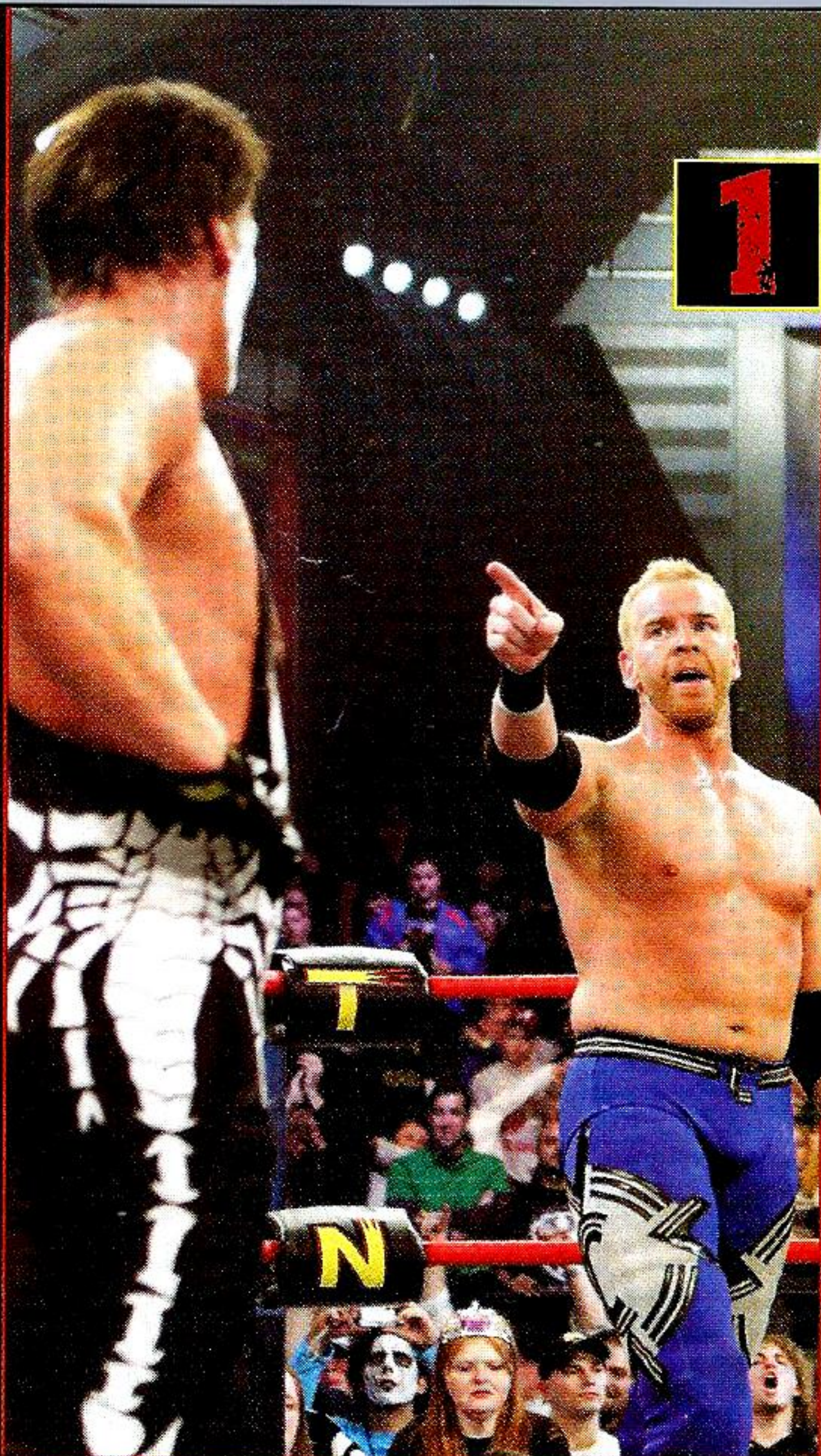
CAREER GROWTH: Sting had a tremendous career from 1985 until WCW shut down in 2001. If he had never stepped back into a ring again, he would still have had a Hall of Fame-worthy career. When TNA announced Sting was coming back, we had our doubts. We didn't want to see him tarnish his legacy with poor matches or by being out of shape. Instead, he has looked great in the ring and is adding a great epilogue to a great career. **GRADE: A**

OVERALL VALUE: Sting is a dream come true for TNA. Not only does he have name recognition and the ability to draw TV viewers and PPV buys, but he's also the kind of wrestler who can help mentor the younger wrestlers on the roster. He's a good wrestler to have in the ring and a good man to have in the locker room. **GRADE: B+**



STING



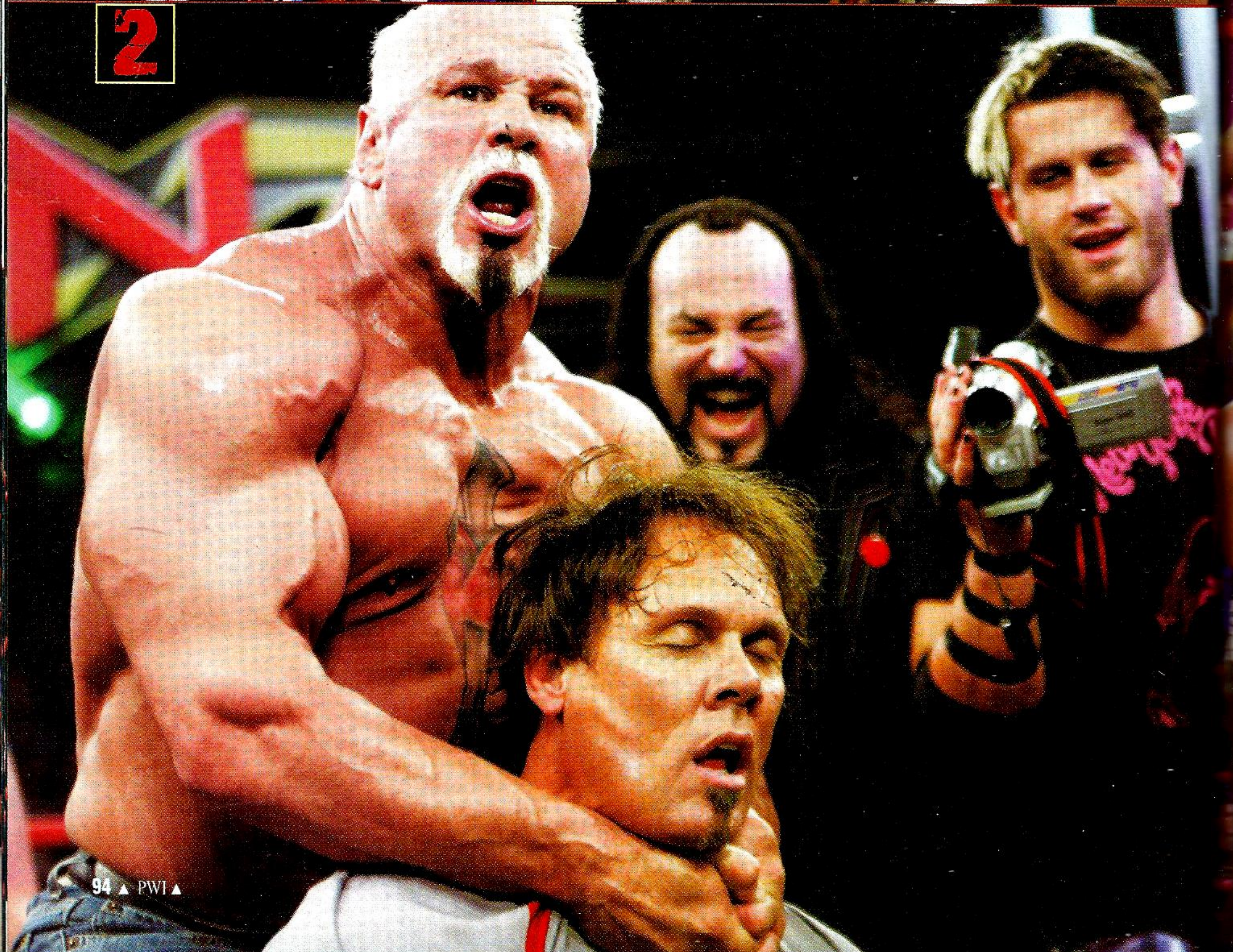


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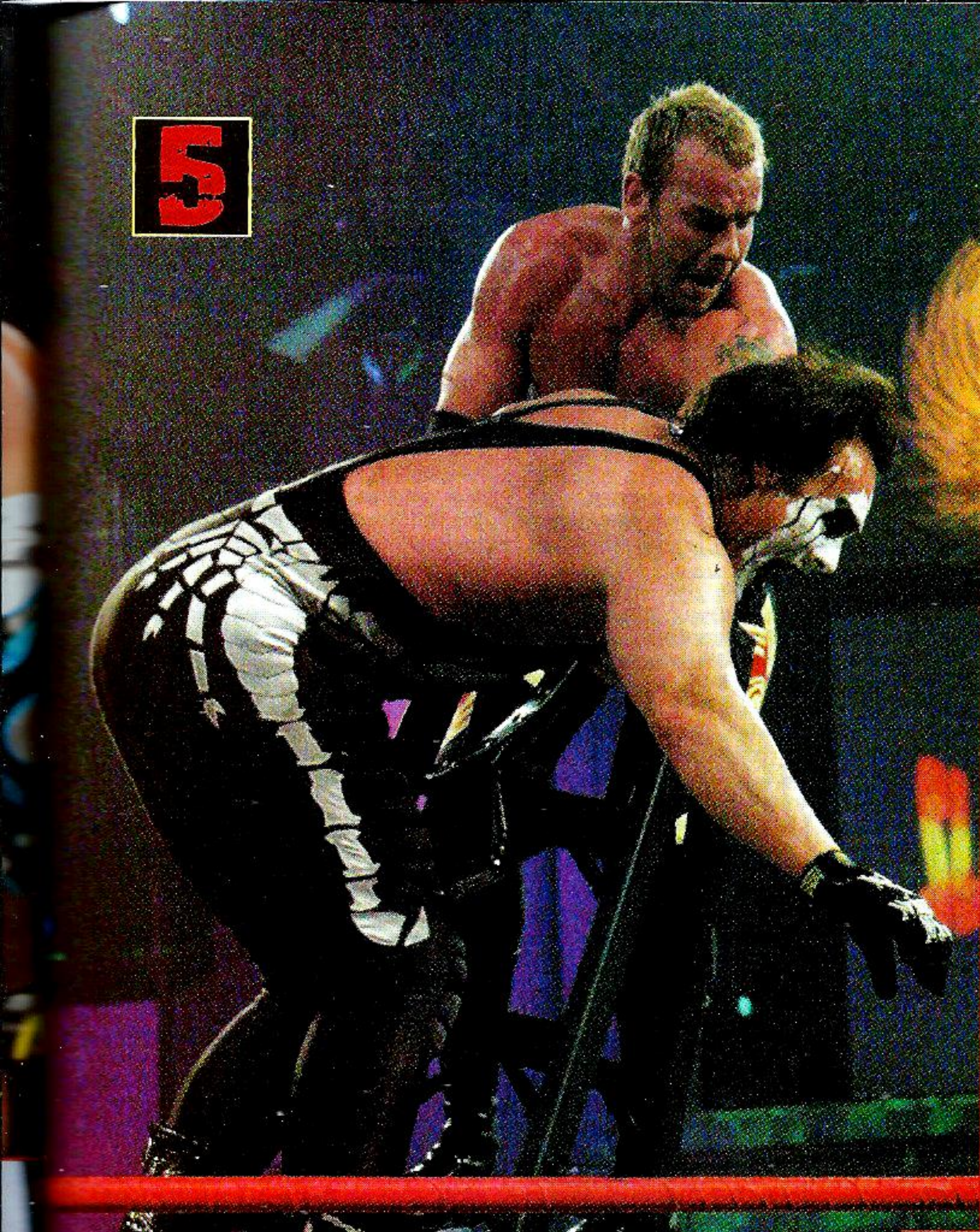


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2



5



1 Sting was lured out of retirement by the prospect of leaving the sport on his own terms. Almost immediately, he bonded with fellow TNA newcomer Christian Cage.

2 It turned out that Jarrett had one massive trick up his sleeve in the form of Scott Steiner. "Big Poppa Pump" would become the muscle in Jarrett's Army of miscreants.

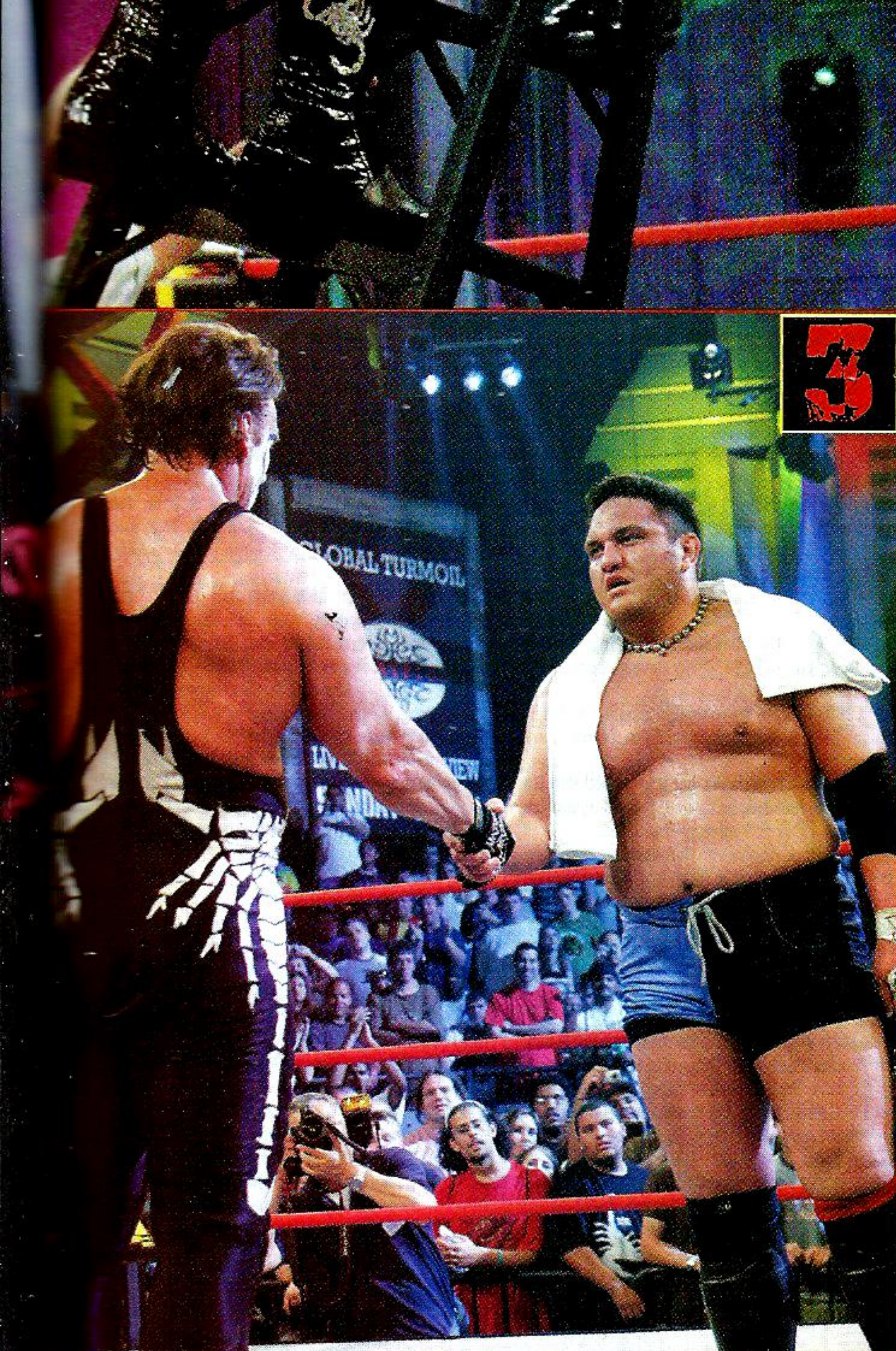
3 In order to combat Jarrett and Steiner, Sting recruited an unlikely ally in the form of X division champion Samoa Joe. The duo dispatched their foes at TNA's Sacrifice pay-per-view in May.

4 During a brief, self-imposed retirement, Jarrett and his cronies successfully lured Sting back into a TNA ring by harassing Steve Borden and his family.

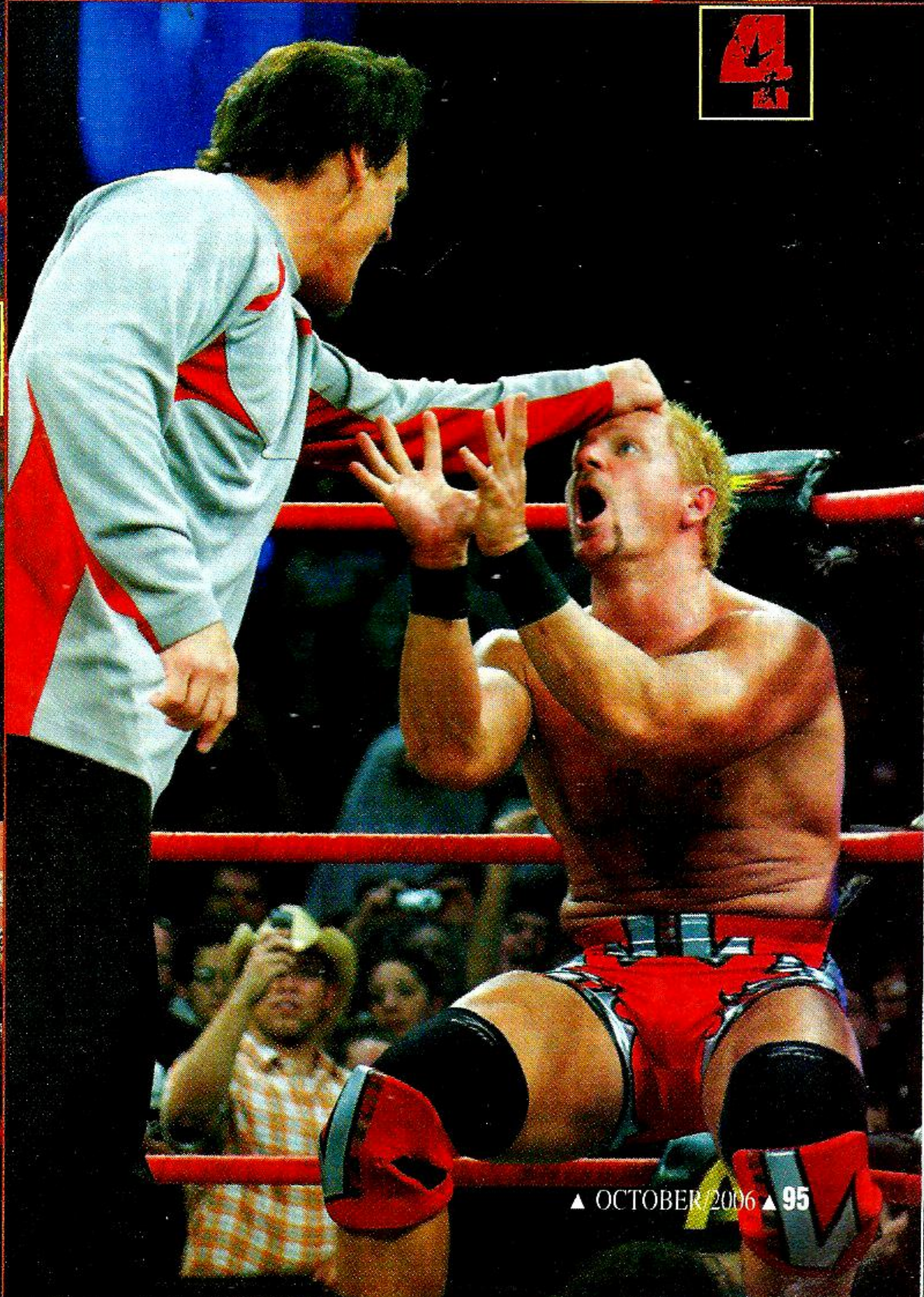
5 Old allegiances meant nothing during the "King Of The Mountain" NWA World title match at Slammiversary. Sting squared off with Christian at various points during the match.

6 Taking out then-NWA World champion Jeff Jarrett was Sting's primary goal once he returned to TNA. Jarrett would feel the "Stinger's" wrath many times over the first half of 2006.

STING



3



4

BETH PHOENIX

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Beth Phoenix has been competing all over the independent circuit for the past five years dreaming of getting the opportunity to compete in WWE. You could say her only goal was to get that all-important call-up to WWE, which she received in May. Unfortunately, in her first singles match live on *Raw*, Beth suffered a broken jaw from a slap to the face by Victoria.

The injury couldn't have happened at a worse time. Beth was preparing to face Mickie James for the women's title. Hopefully, she will be back in the ring by the time this magazine hits newsstands. And it

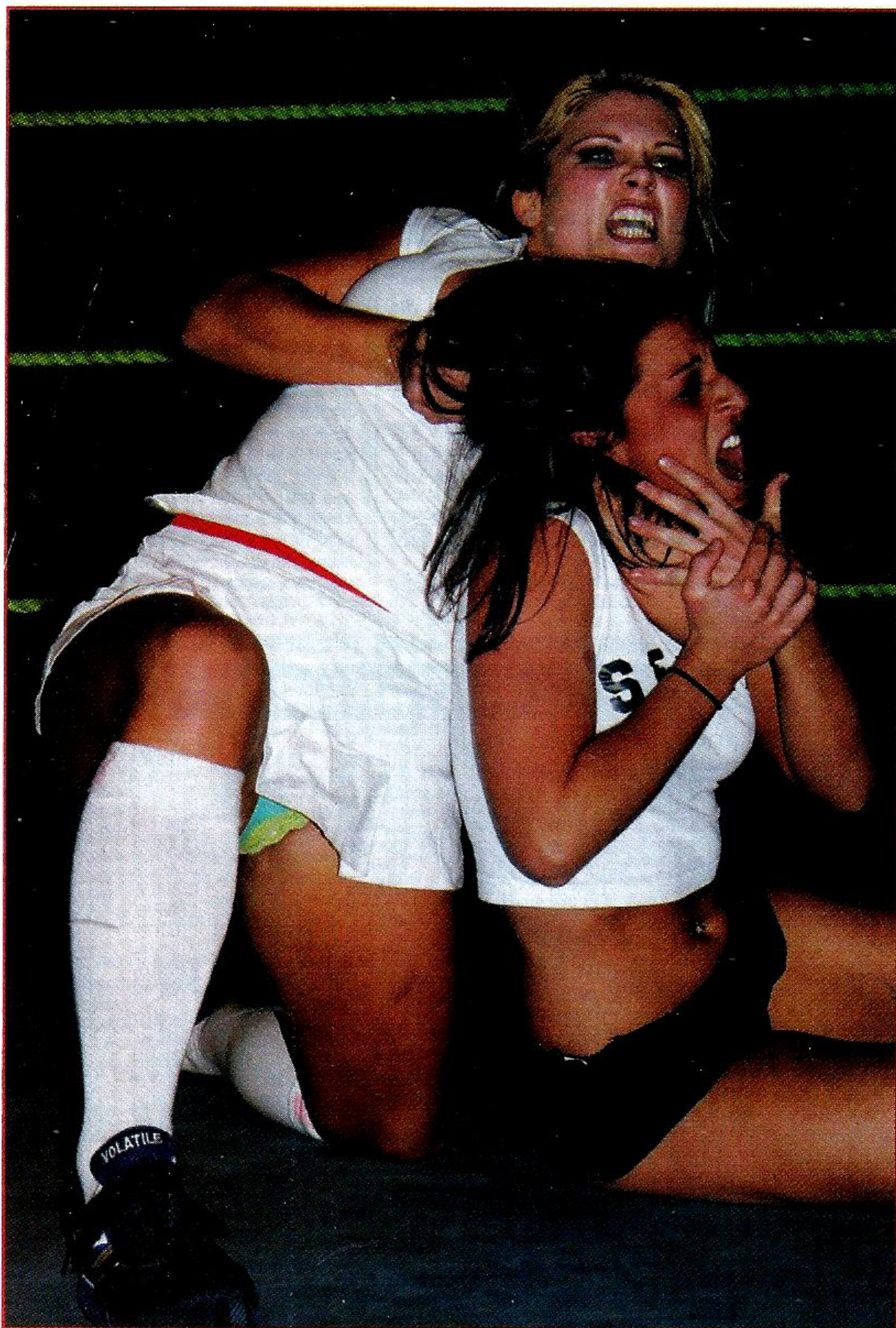
wouldn't exactly shock us if she were the women's champion soon after. **GRADE: A-**

MARKETABILITY: We still haven't gotten a lot of back-story on Phoenix and her bad blood with Mickie James. Until the fans get to learn a little bit about her and her motivations, she will have trouble connecting with fans. There are a lot of attractive women in WWE, and it's harder than ever for one to break away from the pack. However, unlike many of the other Divas, Phoenix is a wrestler first and foremost—much like former WWE Diva Molly Holly. We think she will win over the fans and become WWE's second most popular woman behind only Trish Stratus. But that will take time. She's not there yet. **GRADE: C-**

REPERTOIRE: As anyone who has seen her on the independent circuit can attest, Phoenix is extremely powerful. She often faced—and beat—male wrestlers and should have no trouble overpowering the women of WWE. Her version of the Michinoku driver is quite effective as well. Beth also wrestled on the college level and is the only WWE Diva with true amateur wrestling experience. **GRADE: A-**

CAREER GROWTH: Beth paid her dues competing throughout the Northeast and Ontario, and then spent more than a year in OVW, where she played love interest to Chris Masters, Aaron Idol, and Shelley Martinez. Now she's finally doing what she truly wants to do—wrestling for WWE and contending for the women's title. It's hard to give her anything other than a perfect score. **GRADE: A+**

OVERALL VALUE: The women's division is going to be facing some difficult times ahead. Stratus has been the dominant female, but she can't carry the division on her back forever. Victoria has opened her own restaurant and hinted at retirement. Candice Michelle and the rest of the Diva Search girls just aren't ready for title contention, and Lita has essentially stopped wrestling. With a lack of talent at the top of the division, Phoenix has a tremendous opportunity to make a big impact. **GRADE: B+**



BETH
PHOENIX

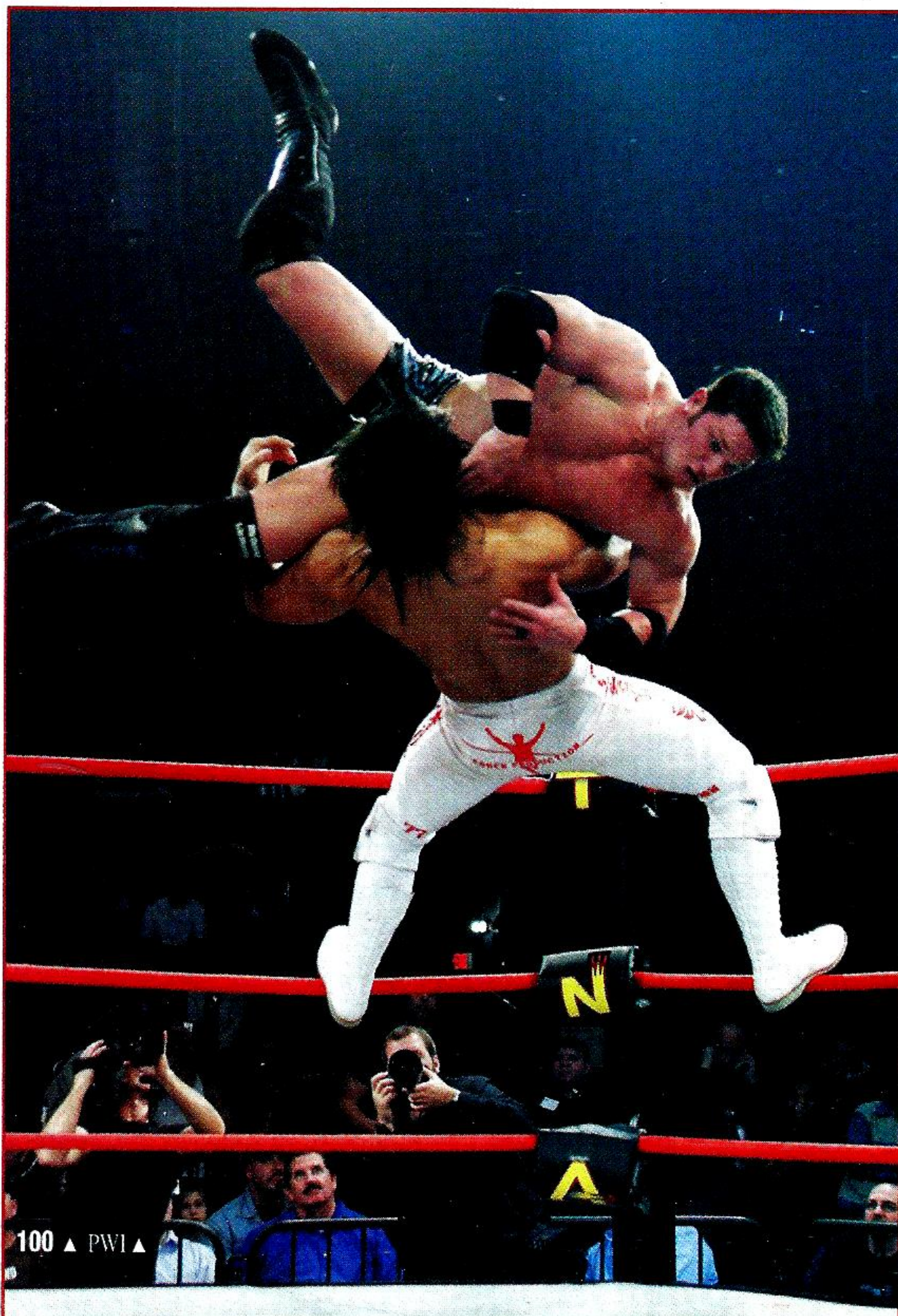


A.J. STYLES

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Dusty Rhodes managed to win the NWA World title three times over the course of his 30-plus years in wrestling. A.J. Styles has won that same title three times in the span of a mere three years, and yet, for some reason, we tend to think that Styles still needs to prove himself as a viable World title contender. Part of that is that the nature of the sport has changed and accelerated due to weekly TV programming and monthly pay-per-views. Another part of it has to do with the fact that the NWA was once the unquestioned premier wrestling organization in the U.S., and now it's a distant second to the massive WWE. But mostly it has to do with Styles. Styles made a conscious decision to concentrate on the X division rather than chase the NWA World title. While most observers see

that as a step backward, Styles sees it as a lateral move that allows him to face more athletic competition and to better showcase his style of wrestling. Styles helped make the X division what it is today, and he's wrestled some unforgettable matches over the past few years. But until Styles puts all of his energy toward a push for the NWA World title, we have to consider him a "phenomenal" underachiever. **GRADE: C**

MARKETABILITY: Styles is the living embodiment of what differentiates TNA from WWE. He is innovative, young, fresh, and dynamic. He has plenty of support from TNA's marketing department. But if he were to hold the NWA World title for a sustained period of time, his push would be that much bigger. **GRADE: B+**



REPERTOIRE: Styles and Christopher Daniels have had the best rivalry in TNA's brief history. By hanging with Daniels, Styles showed the depth of his moveset. But whereas Daniels is always striving for new moves and submission holds, Styles is always looking for new ways to fling his body at an opponent with topes, dives, and planchas. Styles' repertoire is impressive, but he's not quite at Daniels' level. But then, few people are. **GRADE: A-**

CAREER GROWTH: Styles ran into a brick wall in Samoa Joe. He wisely opted to begin regularly teaming with Daniels, and he and "The Fallen Angel" won the NWA World tag title at Slammiversary. Whenever Styles ventures outside his X division comfort zone, we see that as a very good thing. **GRADE: A**

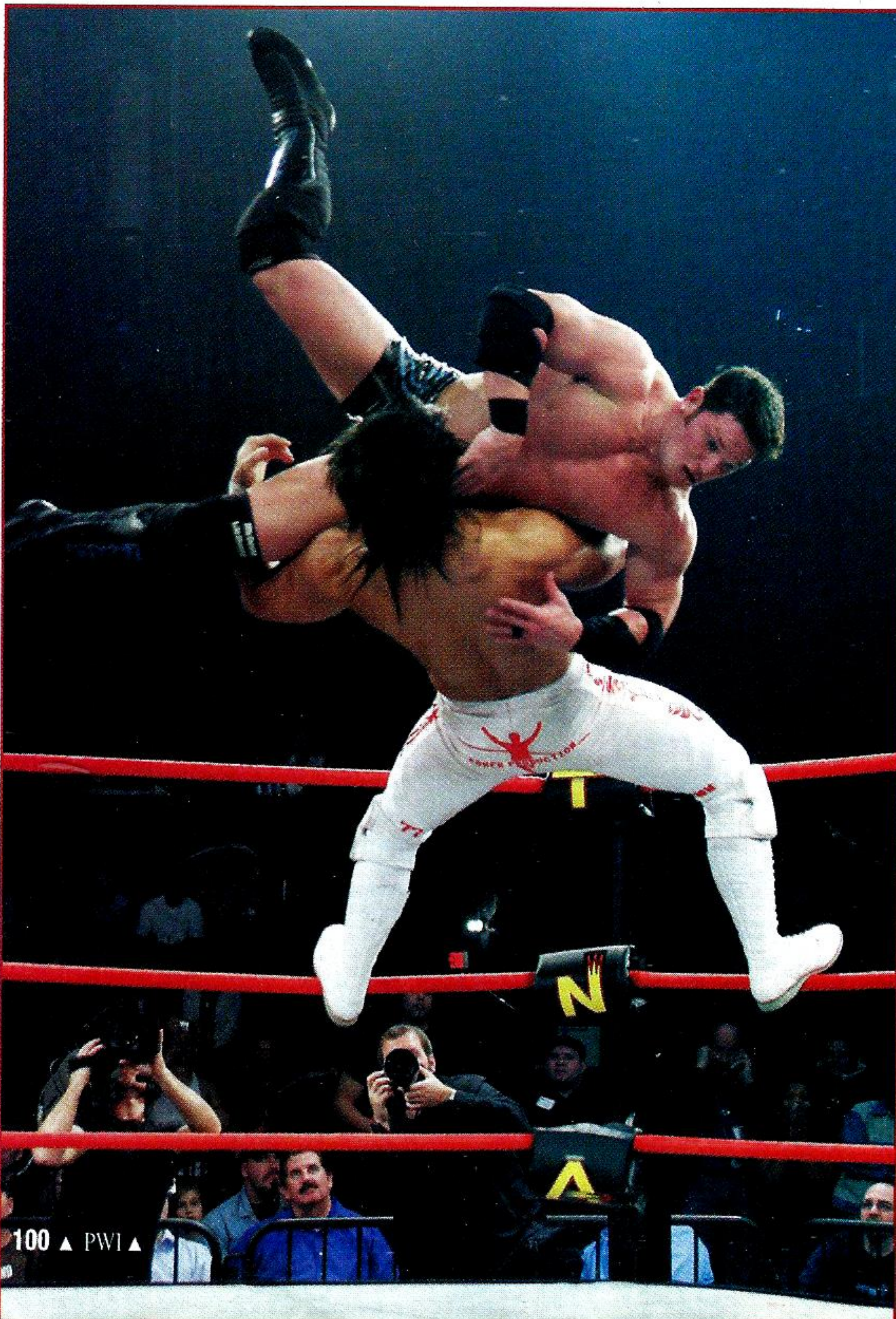
OVERALL VALUE: Styles is still the man in TNA. Samoa Joe is getting most of the attention right now, but Styles is the company's most consistent competitor. Styles is the best high-flier in the business today. In fact, he may be the most exciting wrestler in the business today. And he is truly the heart and soul of the X division, which is the heart and soul of TNA. When fans think TNA, they think A.J. Styles. And that's very good for TNA. **GRADE: B+**

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A.J.
STYLES



TRIPLE-H

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Triple-H had one big goal this year: To win the Raw World title in the main event of WrestleMania 22. He made it to the main event at 'Mania, but ended up tapping out to John Cena. He came up short again at Backlash, and that 11th world title reign he covets so dearly continues to elude him. Reuniting with Shawn Michaels as DeGeneration X has excited the



fans, but a protracted feud with Vince McMahon and The Spirit Squad is only going to keep him out of the Raw World title picture. For a man who lives for the title, he is further from title contention than he has been in years. **GRADE: C**

MARKETABILITY: It's 1998 all over again! Fans are crotch-chopping, Triple-H and Michaels are mooning people, and DX signs are all over arenas. It's hard to tell if this DX reunion will have legs or if it will burn out after a few months, but right now DX is trendy again. That means WWE will be selling plenty of DX merchandise and Triple-H should call himself the "King Of Marketability." **GRADE: A+**

REPERTOIRE: Triple-H has plenty of critics, but one thing even the harshest of those critics has to concede is that he is a true student of the game. During his association with Ric Flair, Hunter picked the "Nature Boy's" brain and added even more moves to his repertoire. He may be the consummate blend of raw power, conditioning, and encyclopedic knowledge of wrestling. **GRADE: A+**

CAREER GROWTH: One good thing about Triple-H's thorough knowledge of wrestling is that he has been able to develop a style that uniquely suits his physical gifts. He doesn't flirt with injury by taking unnecessary risks, and he understands how to pace himself—both in matches and in dealing with the regular grind of a WWE touring schedule. That means Triple-H still has plenty of good years ahead of him. While he failed to regain the Raw World title, he freshened his image by re-forming DX. He avoided growing stale and seems to have found his passion once again. When he's ready to challenge for the title again, he'll be better equipped to win it than he was earlier this year. **GRADE: B+**

OVERALL VALUE: It's hard to evaluate Hunter's overall value to WWE, simply because it would be inconceivable to imagine him wrestling anywhere *other* than WWE. He's just as much a part of WWE as the McMahon family (of which he is an extended member). With 10 world championships to his credit, he's every bit as good as he says he is. But sometimes Triple-H actually hurts WWE by monopolizing the top spot and preventing other wrestlers from breaking through the glass ceiling to main-event status. He best serves WWE in his current role—a featured performer competing outside the WWE title picture. **GRADE: B+**

TRIPLE-H



UMAGA

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Armando Alejandaro Estrada's "Samoan Bulldozer" is cutting a swath of devastation through the Raw brand. The last time Umaga was in WWE, he was known as Jamal, one-half of the tag team Three Minute Warning with his cousin Rosey. When he was released from WWE, he regained his confidence with a successful tour of Japan. Now he's back in WWE with a fresh look and a renewed desire to prove himself. Umaga fought to survive in Japan. Now he's back on the big stage of WWE, and—as of press time—still undefeated on *Raw*. **GRADE: A+**

MARKETABILITY: You're not going to find Umaga cutting great promos or coming up with snappy catchphrases. You're probably not going to see him wrestle many five-star classic matches, or see any *Best Of Umaga* DVDs. But Umaga does have some marketable

points. He has a very entertaining manager, a unique look and style, and he presents several intriguing prospective match-ups (such as against Shawn Michaels, Kane, and Carlito). There's money to be made from Umaga. **GRADE: B**

REPERTOIRE: Is there a less likely old-school move to make a return to prominence in 2006 than "The Samoan Spike"—a stiff thumb to the throat? Terry Gordy, Brian Adias, and Killer Khan all used variations of the move at points in their careers, and it proved to be a very effective finisher for all three of them. While opponents are worried about avoiding that match-ending shot to the trachea, Umaga can batter them with knees, punches, and corner splashes. As long as he doesn't have to compete under Marquis de Queensbury rules, Umaga will be fine. **GRADE: B**

CAREER GROWTH: While Umaga was facing some very good competition overseas, returning to WWE is a big step forward in his career. Three Minute Warning never achieved their potential. That run, and Umaga's subsequent release, had to leave a foul taste in his mouth. Now he has a chance to start over, and Umaga's making the most of it. **GRADE: A**

OVERALL VALUE: John Cena is a charismatic wrestler with plenty of marketability. He's not the world's greatest wrestler, and he has plenty of naysayers out there, but he sells tickets, and he represents wrestling well to mainstream audiences. Sounds a little like Hulk Hogan, circa 1985, to us. In his first title run, Hogan dined on a parade of monster heels like King Kong Bundy, Kamala, and Andre. If Cena regains the title (and we think it will happen soon enough), Umaga can be one of those monster heels for him to vanquish. Umaga can pose a strong challenge that Cena can overcome without being outshined, as Cena was by Kurt Angle, Triple-H, and RVD. Umaga can help Cena—and others—build credibility, and that's an attractive niche. **GRADE: B+**



UMAGA



THE UNDERTAKER

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: The biggest accomplishment The Undertaker has had since our last "Report Cards" was keeping his WrestleMania undefeated streak alive by beating Mark Henry convincingly in a casket match. However, before The "Dead Man" could build any momentum from that win and all the hype his streak

received, he suffered the worst loss of his career to The Great Khali at Judgment Day. Khali may be a genetic freak, but under no circumstances should The Undertaker be losing matches to him. Khali is nowhere near 'Taker's league. We have to wonder if age is finally beginning to catch up to 'Taker or if his passion for wrestling is fading. **GRADE: C**

MARKETABILITY: The Undertaker is a proven draw and has been for more than a decade now. He has managed to tweak his look and gimmick just enough through the years to keep himself fresh and relevant—call him pro wrestling's version of Madonna. The lengthy sabbaticals he seems to be taking more and more actually help him maintain his marketability since absence does indeed make the heart grow fonder. **GRADE: A**

REPERTOIRE: One of the most impressive things about The Undertaker is that he's always willing to change up his repertoire and add a new dimension to his offense. When opponents began to develop counters to the "Tombstone," he started using the chokeslam, and then the "Last Ride" power bomb. When he faced larger opponents and had difficulty lifting them, he started using the "Dragon Sleeper" and the running DDT. The ability to adjust is the hallmark of all great athletes, and it's what makes Undertaker a true "Phenom." **GRADE: A**

CAREER GROWTH: Undertaker is something of a part-time wrestler these days. He's not on the road every night, and he's not wrestling every week on *Smackdown*. He is exactly what he should be—a featured performer who competes on major cards. But the way he has been manhandled by The Great Khali has been disappointing. Someone of his stature shouldn't be losing matches to a virtual rookie like Khali. 'Taker needs to right that wrong and score some convincing wins over the big man from India, or his reputation as a living legend may take a major hit. **GRADE: B**

OVERALL VALUE: Undertaker is still an important part of WWE. He represents the old guard and is considered to be the unofficial leader of the Smackdown locker room. 'Taker is still a legitimate title contender and PPV attraction with a massive fan base. He can headline on his own or help elevate young up-and-comers. Like Andre the Giant before him, he can give credibility to others or he can headline on his own. That's a very rare, and valuable, combination. **GRADE: B+**



THE UNDERTAKER



THE BIG SHOW

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Last year, we gave The Big Show a D in this category, noting that a man of his size should have more than a paltry two world championships under his belt since joining WWE back in 1999. Once again, Show failed to win a world strap this year, though he did have an impressive Raw World tag title reign with Kane. Maybe we're unfairly holding Show to a higher standard than his peers. Maybe it's unrealistic to think size alone should automatically make someone a title contender. After all, Andre the Giant only had one WWF World title reign during his entire career, and that lasted all of 52 seconds. Over 7' tall, Show makes for a mighty big target, and we *still* feel he's underachieving. But at least he is challenging himself, conquering new goals in the tag team division and then moving on to the potentially hostile confines of ECW. The big man is definitely putting forth the effort. **GRADE: C**

MARKETABILITY: There are times when The Big Show seems to be the funniest, most down-to-earth guy around. Some of his skits with Kane showcased the great comic timing and delivery he exhibited during an appearance on *Saturday Night Live* hosted by The Rock a few years back. But then, at other times, he's almost a caricature of a wrestler—grunting, screaming, and spitting like a lunatic. When he's calm, cool, and collected, he could become a major star, especially in a WWE Films vehicle. Otherwise, he's just another big, angry guy, and that's not very marketable. **GRADE: B-**

REPERTOIRE: When you're over 7' tall and tipping the scales at close to 500 pounds, you really don't need a lot of flashy moves to get attention. The Big Show relies on four or five huge moves—the chokeslam, the big chops, and the bodyslam chief among them—but, if pushed, there are plenty of other moves he can bring out of the bag. After 11 years of wrestling the top names in the sport, Show has certainly picked up on more moves, but his main—if somewhat conservative—moveset has served him relatively well. **GRADE: B+**

CAREER GROWTH: Show didn't really break a lot of new ground over the past year. He's another example of a wrestler stuck in a comfort zone. Or, at least, he was until he joined ECW in June. It was a risky move, but it proves that Show is ready to face new challenges. Now we have to see if he excels in ECW or if he becomes a new version of 911—a one-dimensional novelty act. **GRADE: B-**

OVERALL VALUE: The Big Show still has an awful lot of value for WWE. When John Cena first hit the FU on the big man, it elevated him to an entirely new level. A clean win over Show still means something and can help make a wrestler's career. Show is also a credible title contender and a legitimate main-eventer. He may not have the value he did back during the "Monday Night Wars," but he's an integral piece of WWE and ECW. **GRADE: B-**



THE BIG SHOW



KANE

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: To fairly analyze Kane's goal achievement, we'd have to make a relatively risky assumption that he actually has concrete goals in the first place. And we're not really sure he does. Certainly, Kane has accomplished quite a bit over the past year. He and The Big Show held the Raw World tag team title for more than five months, and his feature film debut, *See No Evil*, proved to be a modest success at the box office. Kane has done well, but it

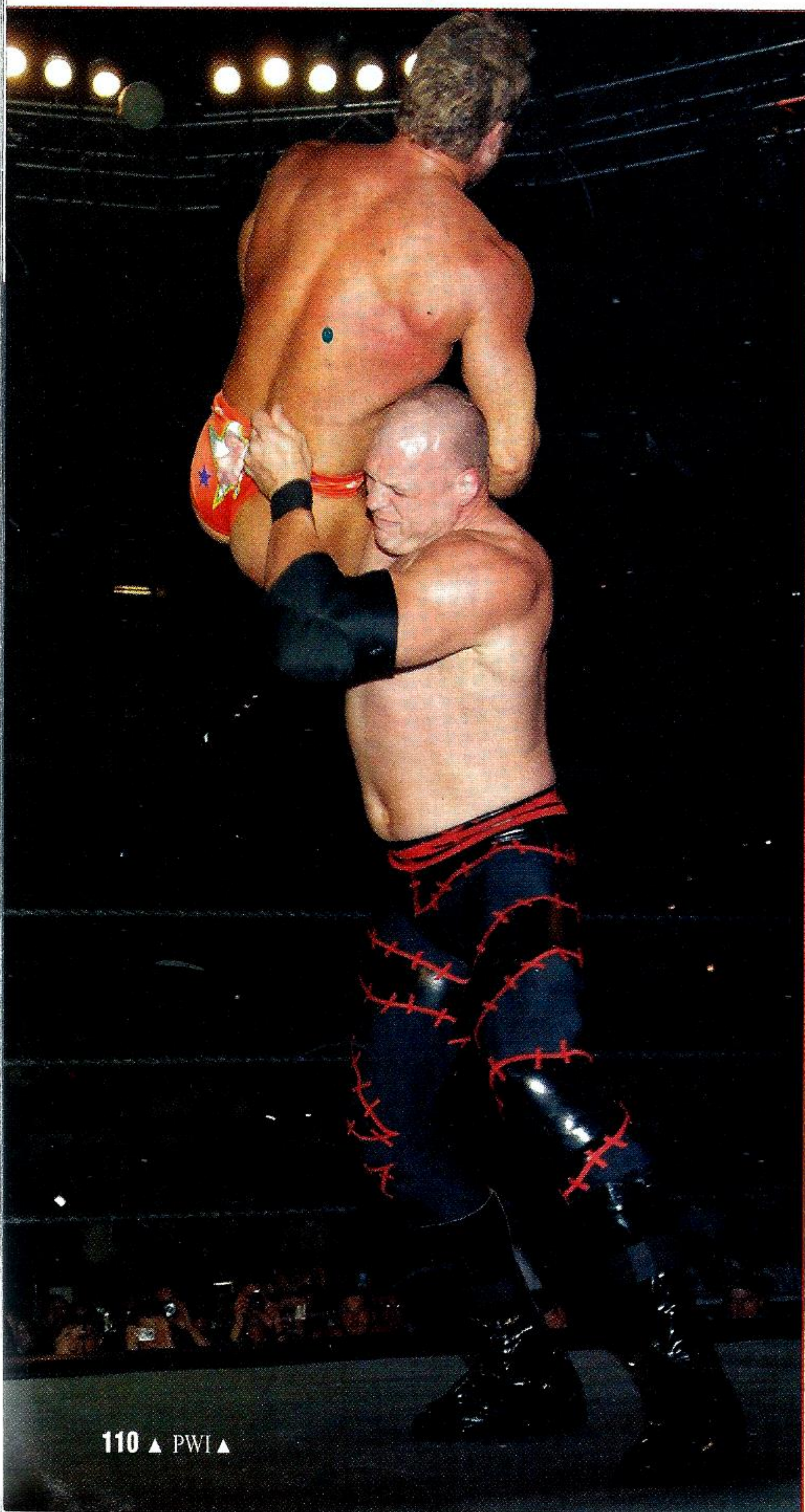
seems like he floats along without any direction or initiative. He's not pursuing goals—he's simply taking advantage of opportunities when they present themselves. He's capable of much more. **GRADE: B-**

MARKETABILITY: *See No Evil* didn't exactly become a summer blockbuster (of course, opening the same day as the heavily hyped *The DaVinci Code* didn't help), but it did turn a nice profit, and Kane got some favorable reviews for playing a murderous lunatic (admittedly, not much of a stretch). He'll never be confused with a typical Hollywood leading man, but he could certainly land more roles as a character actor along the lines of Ving Rhames, Ron Pearlman, or Michael Clark Duncan. Considering how notoriously quiet he is, an autobiography could also become a big seller for WWE. His star is on the rise. **GRADE: B+**

REPERTOIRE: Kane isn't the kind of the guy who worries about the nuances of technical wrestling. If he wants to work a body part, he simply yanks it out of the socket and continues beating on his opponent. It may be one-dimensional, but there's no questioning his effectiveness. However, as he prepared to face his mysterious doppelganger—who seems to have an identical moveset to his own—he had to dig a little deeper into his arsenal to find a way to survive. That's where depth of moveset can make a major difference in a match. **GRADE: B**

CAREER GROWTH: Kane was a major part of the Raw roster for much of the spring and summer of 2006, especially around May 19, the release date of *See No Evil* and the date that drove Kane batty whenever anyone mentioned it. For perhaps the first time in his career, Kane looked more dominant than his perennial adversary The Undertaker, who struggled against The Great Khali. However, despite his demolition of Smackdown World champion Rey Mysterio Jr. in a non-title match in May, Kane failed to get closer to the Raw World title. It would be a shame if all that publicity and renewed killer instinct went to waste and didn't at least get him a title shot. **GRADE: B-**

OVERALL VALUE: When he's at his most bloodthirsty—like when he tried to gouge out The Big Show's eyeball—Kane is one of WWE's top rulebreakers. He can also be a crowd favorite, simply because he is so big and so dominant. When motivated, Kane is a top star. Otherwise, he's a floater. **GRADE: B**



KANE



GAIL KIM

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: When Gail Kim first arrived in TNA, it was something of a surprise. After all, Kim—a tremendously talented wrestler—was joining a company that didn't have a women's division. For a wrestler who won the women's title in her very first match in WWE, it seemed like Kim would be a fish out of water in TNA. Without a title to contend for, what was she going to do? The answer was to become an integral part of Jeff Jarrett's Army, and it's working out

just fine for Kim. She's become a major part of TNA, and she's even had some dark matches against Traci Brooks to be released on DVD down the road. It's the best of both worlds. **GRADE: B**

MARKETABILITY: TNA doesn't promote its Knockouts quite as much as WWE pushes its Divas, but give it time—they will. Kim is a stunningly beautiful woman who also happens to be a damn good wrestler. Put her in a bikini and you're going to sell plenty of magazines and DVDs. Put her in the ring to wrestle and people are going to pay to see her compete. Again, it's the best of both worlds. Unfortunately, TNA isn't doing either well enough yet. **GRADE: B+**

REPERTOIRE: Kim has implemented Lucha Libre and Japanese influences into her wrestling style. She doesn't just have four or five big moves that constitute her repertoire. Instead, she transitions from move to move with deep armdrags, flying headscissors, and high hiptosses. However, because she's not wrestling regularly, we have to wonder if Kim's skills are stagnating. There's a big difference between interfering in a match with a well-timed huracanrana and wrestling a full match. Her sporadic wrestling appearances hurt her score. **GRADE: B-**

CAREER GROWTH: Kim has put her wrestling career on the back burner in favor of working as a manager and a valet. That may seem counter-intuitive at first blush, but considering Kim was released from WWE in 2004, it's not a terrible move. She may not be contending for a championship, but she's back in a major company participating in top storylines. That's certainly a step up from where Kim was a year ago. **GRADE: A-**

OVERALL VALUE: Kim isn't a huge player in the big picture in TNA. She adds some sex appeal to Jarrett's Army and is quite adept at running interference, but if she left TNA tomorrow, it wouldn't exactly send shockwaves through the company. That's not an indictment of her abilities; it's just an appraisal of her current role in TNA. If TNA instituted a women's title, Kim's stock would go up, but until that happens, she's no more vital than Christy Hemme or Jackie Gayda. **GRADE: B**



GATT
KIMI



BOBBY LASHLEY

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: It's tempting to compare Bobby Lashley to Brock Lesnar, since both are successful amateur wrestlers who have transformed themselves into explosive, monstrously enormous pros. And while Lashley may be the next "Next Big Thing," that comparison just isn't fair. Lesnar was put on the fast track to the main event picture, while Lashley has wisely decided to move a bit more slowly. He came of age during his feud with Finlay and destroyed JBL for the U.S. title. Lashley is still young, and he's still beatable, but he's improving slowly and steadily. He's on the right path. Just ask King Booker. **GRADE: B**

MARKETABILITY: Lashley has charisma to burn. He's the typical strong, silent type, and, as Goldberg (and to a lesser extent, Lesnar) showed, quiet dominance can be very marketable. The WWE marketing machine hasn't

quite gotten behind him yet, but we have a feeling that as soon as he decides he's ready to make a serious run at the Smackdown World title, the marketing wonks are going to have a field day with him. **GRADE: B**

REPERTOIRE: This category is going to be the key to Lashley's success in WWE. He relies far too much on the strength advantage he enjoys in the vast majority of his matches. But what happens when Lashley gets into the ring with the likes of The Big Show, The Undertaker, or The Great Khali? He needs to rediscover those amateur skills and begin incorporating them into his pro game. With his low center of gravity, he could be a freak of nature if he incorporated some single-leg and double-leg takedowns. His spear is devastating, but he could do much more if he used more technique and leverage than raw power. And he would be well-served to add some submission holds to his arsenal. **GRADE: B-**

CAREER GROWTH: Back in 1987, a young wrestler with the audacity to call himself the Ultimate Warrior debuted in the WWF. But the only people who saw him were fans who were attending non-televised house shows. That's because Warrior spent about six months wrestling dark matches and improving outside of the glare of fan scrutiny. By the time he showed up on TV, Warrior was just hitting his stride. In today's WWE, it's almost impossible for someone to wrestle exclusively in dark matches for that long, but Lashley has taken a similar path. Instead of allowing his weaknesses to be exposed by facing top competition too early, Lashley is steadily climbing the ladder. **GRADE: A**

OVERALL VALUE: Lashley is probably the biggest potential star of the future on the Smackdown roster. He has a U.S. championship run under his belt and is in line to be the brand's top baby face for the next few years. He's enormously valuable to Smackdown. **GRADE: B**



BOBBY
LASHLEY



JAY LETHAL

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Jay Lethal didn't exactly get the superstar treatment when he came to TNA. He just showed up one day, without fancy video packages hyping his arrival, without long promos to establish his name. He simply wrestled. He may have lost some of his first matches, but the former Ring of Honor Pure champion impressed the TNA fans with his acrobatics, his counter-wrestling, and his tenacity. He qualified for Team USA in the World X Cup tournament and has become one of the young lions of the X division. He has begun making a name for himself on a national level and is at the top of the list of contenders for the X title. **GRADE: B+**

MARKETABILITY: We've said it time and time again: The X division competitors need to do more to break away from the pack. We're not suggesting some

cheesy gimmick (Lethal shouldn't even think about changing his name to "The Lethal Weapon," for example), but Lethal and many of his X division peers need to show more of their personalities. We know Lethal has some very impressive speed and ring skills. Everyone in the X division does. But when everyone is very good, no one stands out above the rest. Lethal needs to talk more and show us what makes him different from Sonjay Dutt, Petey Williams, and a host of other X division wrestlers. **GRADE: C-**

REPERTOIRE: Lethal has some great knee strikes and kicks to supplement his high-risk attacks. He's also pretty flashy, which could help or hurt. He's been known to cartwheel out of an armbar, hit lightning-quick dropkicks, and then take a moment to showboat for the fans. Sure, it's pretty, but had Lethal used a more conventional counter (such as a basic reversal), he could have taken the upper hand, rolled his opponent into a pinning position, or worked the arm for a possible submission. Doing all that work for a dropkick and failing to quickly follow up leaves both men up in a neutral position. Lethal needs to know when he should seize the advantage instead of showboating. That's the difference between a good wrestler and a great one. **GRADE: B-**

CAREER GROWTH: It's hard to believe Lethal began his career as Hydro, a member of ROH's goofball Special K faction a few years back. He showed some promise then, but in three short years he has become one of the most respected X division wrestlers in TNA. His next step is to beat Senshi for the X title, and he's moving toward that title clash. **GRADE: A**

OVERALL VALUE: Lethal proved his worth by helping Team USA win the World X Cup. He promises to become a major factor in the X division in the coming months, and could very well serve as captain of Team USA in the next World X Cup competition. He is a stalwart of the X division and an important part of TNA's future. **GRADE: B**



JAY
LETHAL



BRIAN KENDRICK & PAUL LONDON

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Put Brian Kendrick and Paul London in Ring of Honor and they'll be in the main event. Put them in TNA, and either man could win the X division title. But Kendrick and London have struggled in WWE. They have been matched against much larger opponents or placed in go-nowhere feuds on *Velocity* for far too long. It got so bad that Kendrick opted to leave WWE for a while because he was getting so frustrated. When Kendrick and London decided to join forces, they finally got some momentum. The female fans love them for their non-threatening good looks, male fans love them for their quick tags and innovative maneuvers. At Judgment Day, they managed to beat M-N-M for the Smackdown World tag team title, and it looks like they have finally arrived. We still want to see how they'll fare against The Gymini and Kid Kash and Jamie Noble, but being champions sure beats languishing on *Velocity*. **GRADE: B+**

MARKETABILITY: You have to give Kendrick and London credit for trying to spice up their Boy Scout look with those weird masks they wear to the ring, but the last thing those two good-looking guys should be doing is covering their faces. When Kendrick toured Japan, they billed him as "Leonardo Spanky" because of his resemblance to Leonardo DiCaprio. There's a reason that *Titanic* was the largest-grossing film of all-time—young girls were willing to pay money to fawn over DiCaprio. If they can tap into that same demographic, they're going to be a very marketable team. **GRADE: B+**

REPERTOIRE: Both London and Kendrick built their reputations by having top-notch matches on the independent circuit. They haven't had much of an opportunity to show off their individual skills in WWE, and they would be well-served to come up with a nice, flashy double-team finisher. The skills are there, but they're just not being used. **GRADE: B-**

CAREER GROWTH: The fact that M-N-M split up right after losing the belts takes some of the shine away from Kendrick and London. You have to wonder if Melina had already been thinking about breaking up her team, or if—just maybe—M-N-M wasn't trying as hard at Judgment Day because they were just waiting to drop the belts to go their separate ways. We have no way of knowing, but the perception is there. The champs still need to prove themselves as deserving champions and not just champions by default. **GRADE: B**

OVERALL VALUE: WWE hasn't paid much attention to its tag team divisions for a while now. Kendrick and London have an opportunity to build some excitement around the Smackdown tag title. If they can pull it off, they'll be very valuable to WWE. **GRADE: B**



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BRIAN
KENDRICK & PAUL
LONDON



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JOHNNY NITRO

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: The best thing to ever happen to Johnny Nitro was M-N-M losing the Smackdown World tag team title at Judgment Day. At the time, it looked disastrous. After Nitro and Joey Mercury dropped the belts to Brian Kendrick and Paul London, Melina vented her frustrations on General Manager Theodore Long, who responded by firing M-N-M from Smackdown. In the course of 30 minutes, Nitro went from being a champion to being virtually unemployed. As it turned out, the Raw brand was only too happy to welcome Nitro and Melina into the fold. Nitro's debut match on *Raw* was a loss to John Cena, but it was a moral victory. Nitro enjoyed a relatively lengthy advantage over Cena before succumbing, serving notice to Raw's wrestlers and fans that he's a capable singles wrestler and not just one-half of a very good tag team. Nitro is right in the middle of the Intercontinental title picture, and it's not hard to imagine him challenging for the Raw World title a year or two down the line. **GRADE: B+**

MARKETABILITY: If Nitro is committed to singles wrestling and isn't just killing time until Mercury returns, he needs to do a little more to break away from his M-N-M image. He needs to do a little more talking and let some of his individuality shine through. He had a great look and a manager who has the best ring entrance in wrestling, so there's plenty of potential. In some ways, he reminds us of a young Shawn Michaels. **GRADE: B**

REPERTOIRE: Nitro and Mercury had some impressive double-team moves in their arsenal, but Nitro has to add more to his game if he wants to compete as a singles wrestler. His standing shooting star press is impressive, and, in early Raw outings, he has shown some strong basics in concentrating on a body part (usually the left arm) and softening his opponent with slams and suplexes. He has the basics down, but he needs to add more if he wants to really become a standout. **GRADE: C+**

CAREER GROWTH: Nitro is on the verge of achieving great things. He has some size (6'1", 204 pounds), he has model good looks, a hot manager, and he has natural showmanship and charisma. What he doesn't have is a lot of experience. Nitro got into wrestling through *Tough Enough* and barely has three years experience. He learned a lot from his veteran partner, Mercury, but this is the first chance he's had to spread his wings. Raw is the right place for him to develop into a major force, but one false move could also do great harm. This is the riskiest stage of his wrestling career. **GRADE: B**

OVERALL VALUE: Nitro has some star potential and helps fill out the Intercontinental title scene. He's not vital to Raw right now, but he has a lot of potential for the future. **GRADE: B**



JOHNNY
NITRO



C.M. PUNK

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: In the summer of 2005, C.M. Punk was the buzz of the wrestling world. He won the Ring of Honor title in what was supposed to be his final match in the company and then infuriated the fans by signing a WWE contract. After a few crazy weeks where it really looked like Punk may take the belt to WWE with him, he finally dropped the title to James Gibson. But Punk had set himself up as a loose cannon—someone whose unpredictability and intensity would throw a Molotov cocktail into WWE. Instead, Punk had one WWE dark match and got shipped down to OVW. He has looked great in OVW, winning the OVW championship from heated rival Brent Albright, but he lost a full year of his career. For a guy everyone was talking about last year, it's like he's fallen off the face of the earth. **GRADE: C**

MARKETABILITY: This one's a crapshoot. The ROH Punk that became a hero—and then a super-villain—shot from the hip, wrestled 60-minute matches,

and imparted intensity to everything he did. That Punk is still alive and well in OVW, but it's hard to imagine he'll have the same freedom if and when he makes the WWE roster. If Punk is allowed to be himself, he would be completely unlike everyone else in WWE (and ECW) today, and his marketability would be through the roof. His "I'm better than you" shtick could make some very cool T-shirts. But if we get a WWE version of Punk—call him "Punk-lite"—his fan base will reject him, and he won't get over nearly as well. **GRADE: B**

REPERTOIRE: If you ever went to a ROH card and looked carefully at the back curtain, you probably saw Punk watching everyone else's matches. If you were to see Punk's videotape collection, you would be stunned to see how many Japanese wrestling tapes he has. He is always taking notes, always adding new moves and counters to his game. The "Pepsi Plunge" is his main finisher, but he can also put you away with an anaconda vice or a dozen other puroresu-inspired moves. **GRADE: A**

CAREER GROWTH: He has a WWE contract and he's the OVW heavyweight champion. That means he's following in the footsteps of John Cena, Batista, and many other current WWE greats. That's not too shabby. **GRADE: B+**

OVERALL VALUE: We're going to have to grade this one on potential more than anything else. While he's not even a part of the main roster right now, there's little doubt that WWE—most likely, Paul Heyman in particular—has big plans for him. If Punk is showcased properly, he can help WWE win back some of its disenfranchised fans who watched ROH as an alternative to WWE, and he can help give some badly needed credibility to ECW. **GRADE: B**



C.M.
PUNK



SCOTT STEINER

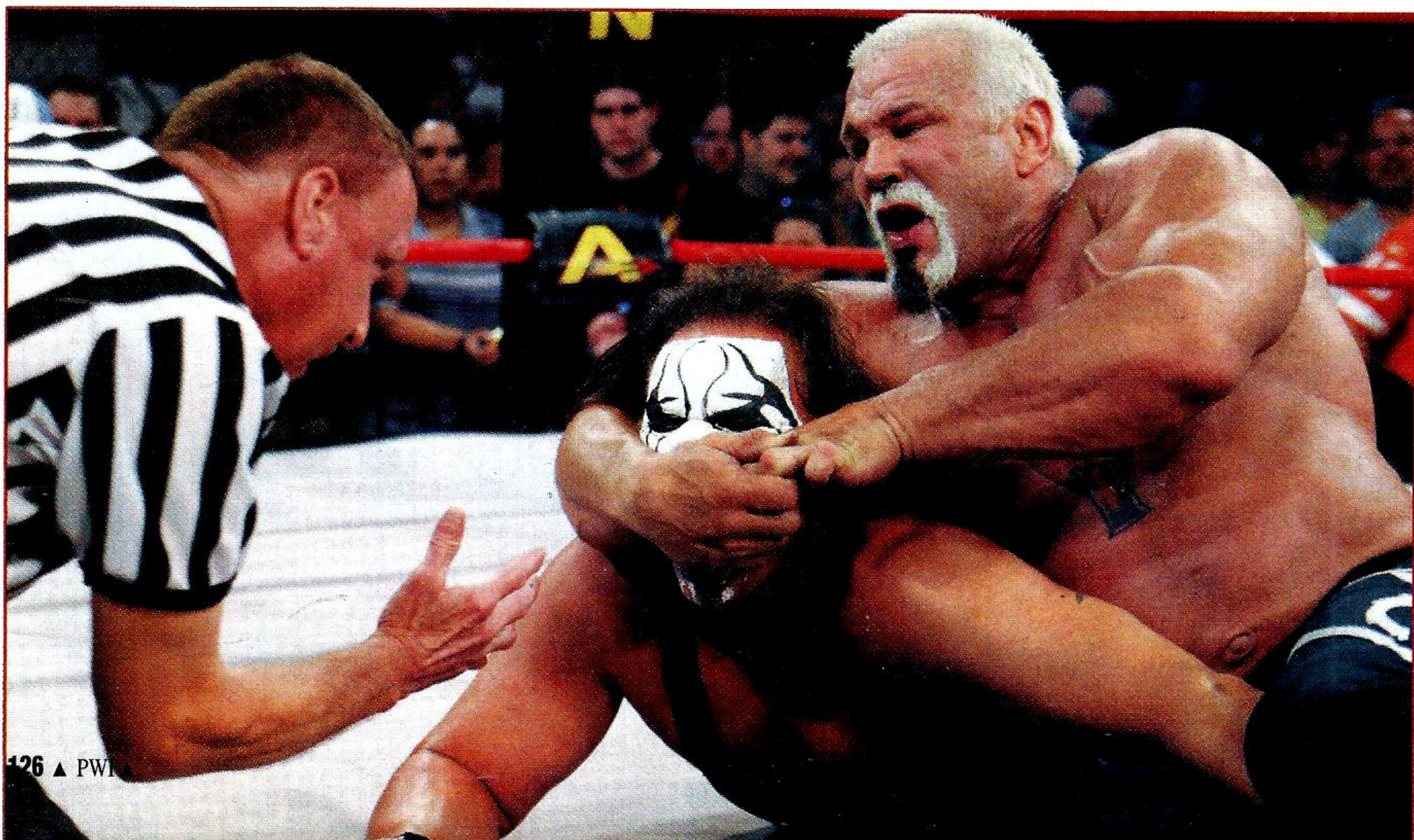
GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: For Scott Steiner, TNA represents redemption. "Big Poppa Pump" had a disappointing run in WWE in 2003. He debuted in that company with massive hype and had high-profile and thoroughly disappointing matches against Triple-H at the Royal Rumble and No Way Out. It was so bad that Steiner didn't even land a match at WrestleMania 19, just five weeks after No Way Out. The "Genetic Freak," who terrorized WCW in that promotion's final days, was humiliated. People thought he was washed-up. So when Jeff Jarrett reached out to Steiner, Steiner was only too happy to get another opportunity to help try to erase that image of him as a WWE failure. Even though he lost to Samoa Joe at Slammiversary, it was one of the better matches he's had in the past five years. Steiner showed that he's still relevant—and that he's still a heck of a tough guy. **GRADE: A**

MARKETABILITY: With his "freaks and peaks" and his never-ending stream of risqué nicknames (we loved "Big Bad Booty Daddy"), Steiner has a lot of fan appeal and potential marketability. He also has amateur wrestling credentials from his days in Michigan, as well as one of the most impressive physiques the sport has ever seen. Steiner just screams "pro wrestler" the moment you look at him. He may be a bit of a loose cannon, but he represents pro wrestling, and TNA, very well. Just try to tell Steiner wrestlers aren't real athletes ... we dare you. **GRADE: B+**

REPERTOIRE: It may seem hard to believe, but it was actually Scott Steiner who popularized the huracanrana in the U.S. His "Frankensteiner" was a revolutionary move, especially because, with his well-muscled build, he looked like he could pull his opponent's head clear off his shoulders with it. Steiner also has that amateur pedigree and used to actually show very impressive scientific skills, à la Brock Lesnar. Those days are long gone. Steiner has simplified his game to the point where he's a one-dimensional power wrestler. His added muscle mass has ruined his speed and flexibility. Now, when he faces someone he can't bully (such as Samoa Joe), he's in trouble. **GRADE: C-**

CAREER GROWTH: Steiner is in a good place as Jarrett's chief enforcer. Jarrett has a knack for winning the NWA title, and it's a pretty good bet that the belt will end up around his waist again for an extended period of time. Then all Steiner has to do is to bite the hand that feeds him, and he's right back in line for title shots. Don't think for a moment that hasn't occurred to him. **GRADE: A-**

OVERALL VALUE: Steiner was a great acquisition for TNA. They brought him in, initially, on a trial basis, and things have worked out well for both sides. Steiner's not a franchise player, but he does add prominence and credibility to TNA. **GRADE: B**



SCOTT
STEINER



TEAM 3D

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Brother Ray and Brother Devon want to be remembered as wrestling's all-time greatest tag team. Perhaps the only strong argument against that claim is the fact that they have competed during a weak tag team era. While Team 3D has had some hellacious wars with Team Canada and The James Gang, their ultimate goal is to win the tag title and prove that they can succeed regardless of promotional boundaries. They got their groove back by coming to TNA, but they have yet to win the championship.

GRADE: B-

MARKETABILITY: For nearly a decade, Team 3D was known as The Dudley Boyz. They had some great catchphrases during that time that made its way onto official ECW and WWE merchandise. Unfortunately, when Ray and Devon jumped to TNA, WWE kept their name and part of their likenesses. They're still a very popular team with a built-in fan base from their ECW and WWE days, but the WWE lawyers have hurt their overall marketability. **GRADE: B-**

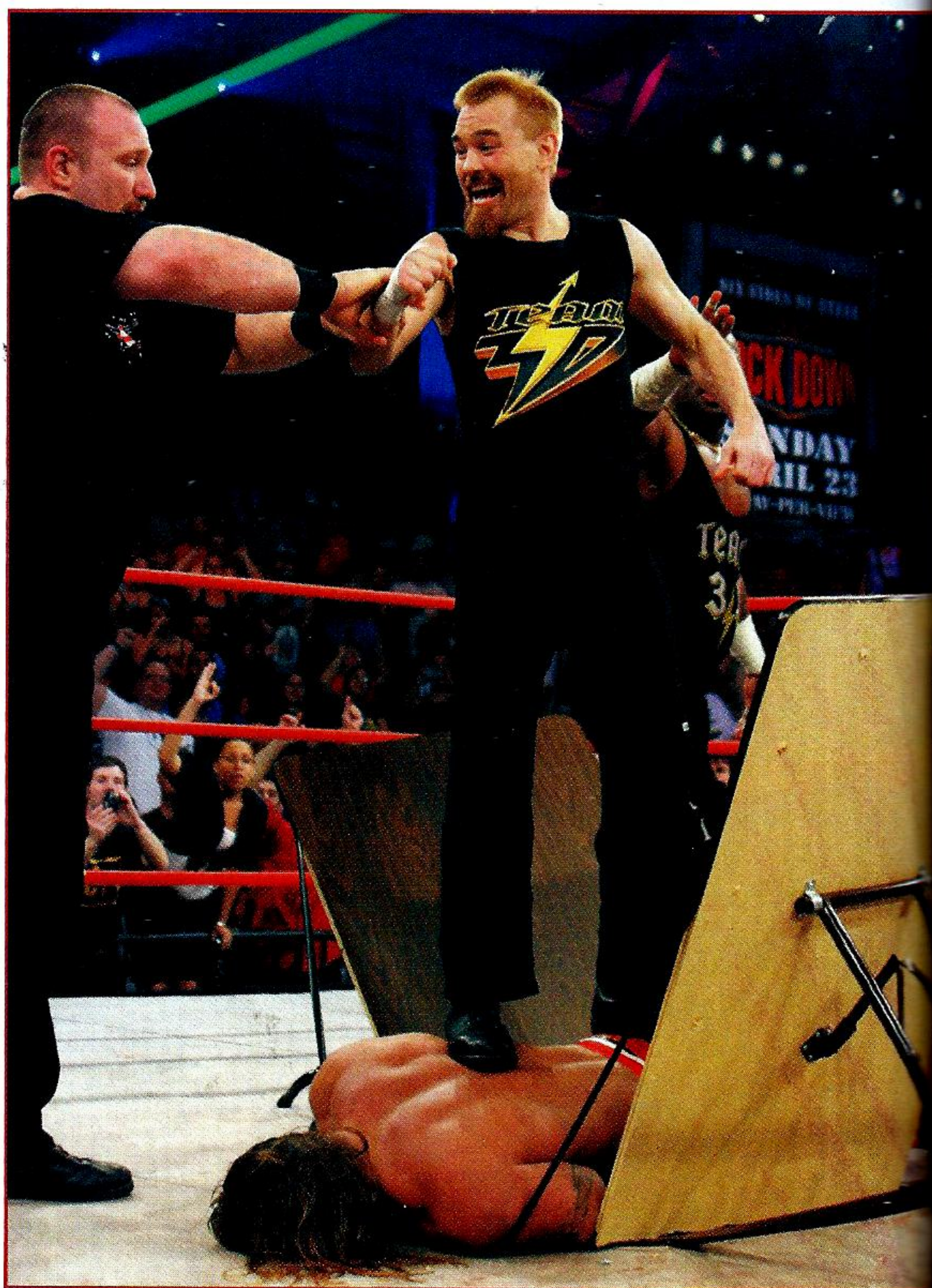
REPERTOIRE: Ray and Devon learned wrestling and counter-wrestling in some dark and dingy wrestling gym decades ago. All that stuff is long forgotten. The only move Team 3D does that would look out of place in a late night bar fight is the 3D. Everything else is what Dusty Rhodes would describe as "a clubbering—four fists coming down on one guy." That smash-mouth style has been effective for Team 3D, so we're not going to fault them for using it. They do what they do well. There's still room for improvement, but, as far as brawling teams go, they're at the top of the heap. **GRADE: B**

CAREER GROWTH: Team 3D was released by WWE shortly after last year's One Night Stand. They rebounded with a successful tour of All Japan and then came to TNA with the expressed purpose of winning the NWA World tag title. Team 3D has thrived in TNA. They have the freedom they enjoyed in ECW where they can speak their minds and wrestle how they want, and, as a result, they're wrestling better than they have

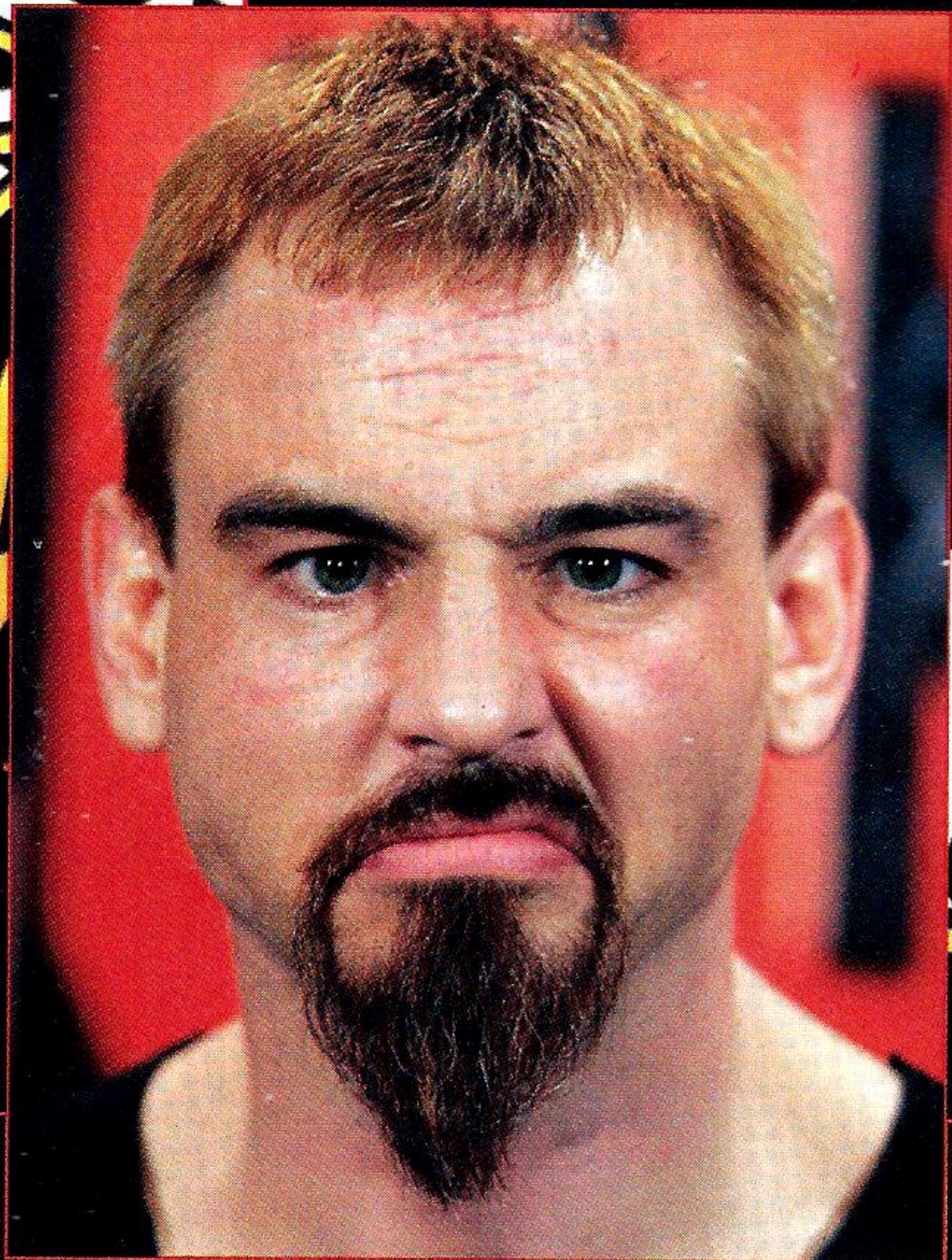
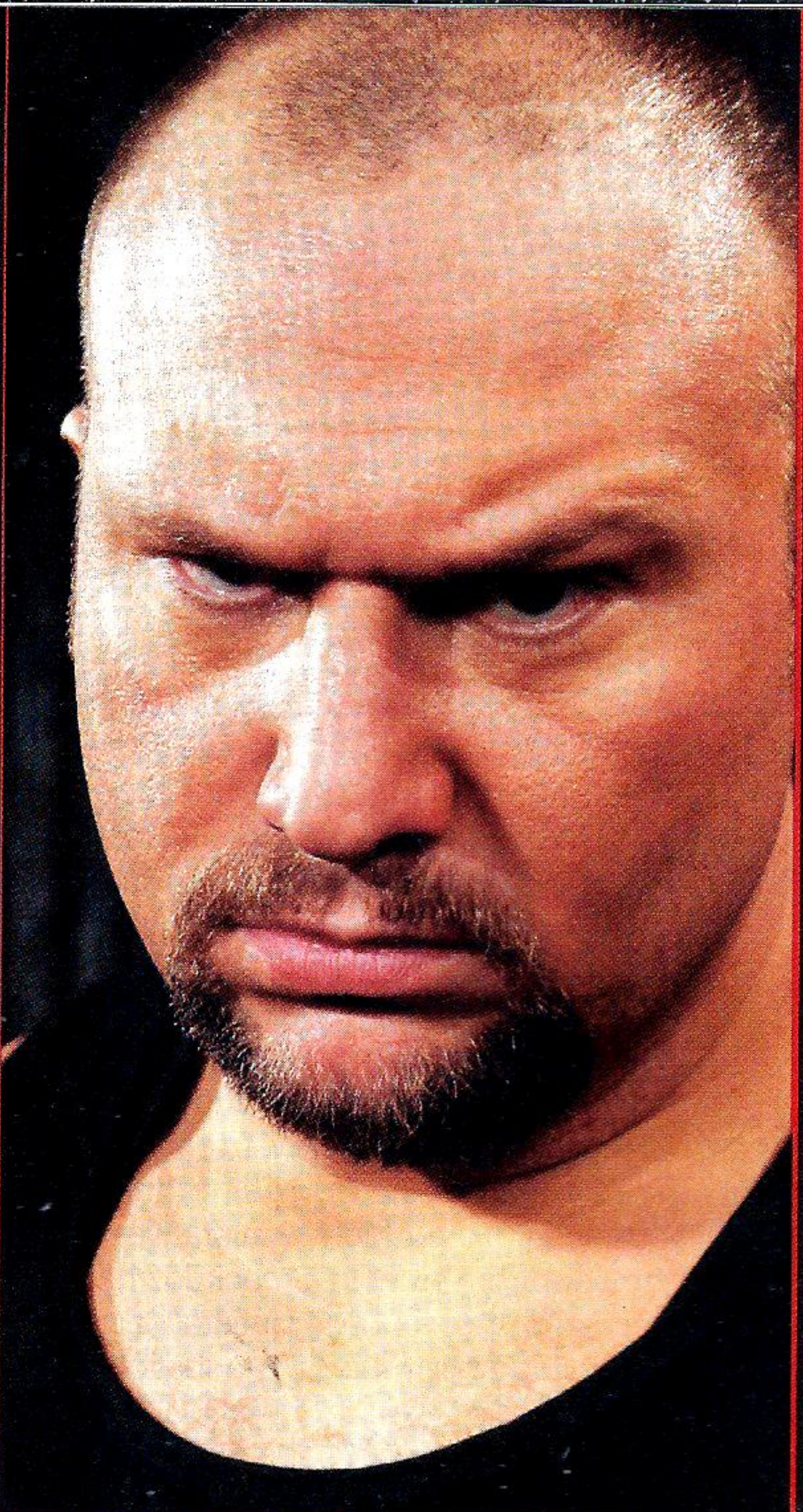
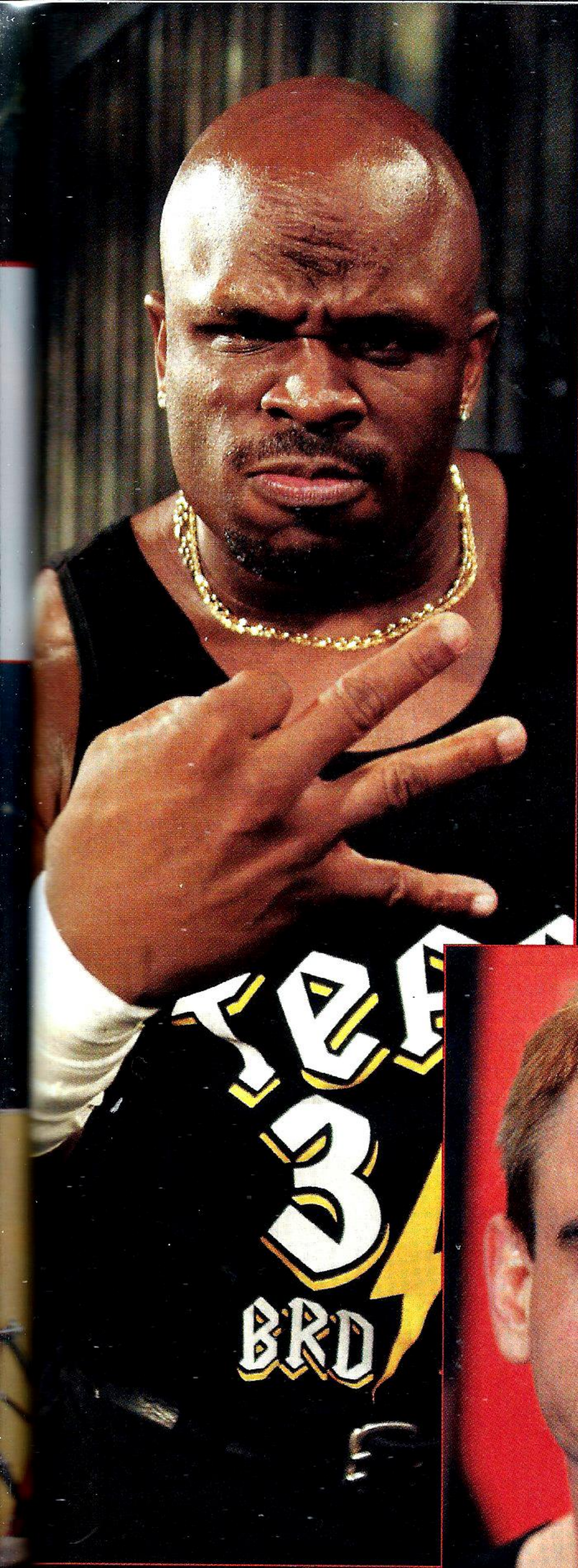
in years. They still need to win the belts for their TNA run to be considered a success, but they are on their way.

GRADE: B

OVERALL VALUE: They may have to go by the name Team 3D, but they're still The Dudley Boyz. They're still the team that incited near-riots in ECW, and the team that competed in back-to-back Matches of the Year in three-way matches against The Hardy Boyz and Edge and Christian in WWE. Ray and Devon can attract new fans to TNA, and they can certainly up the company's quality of matches—and intensity. **GRADE: B**



TEAM
3D



BATISTA

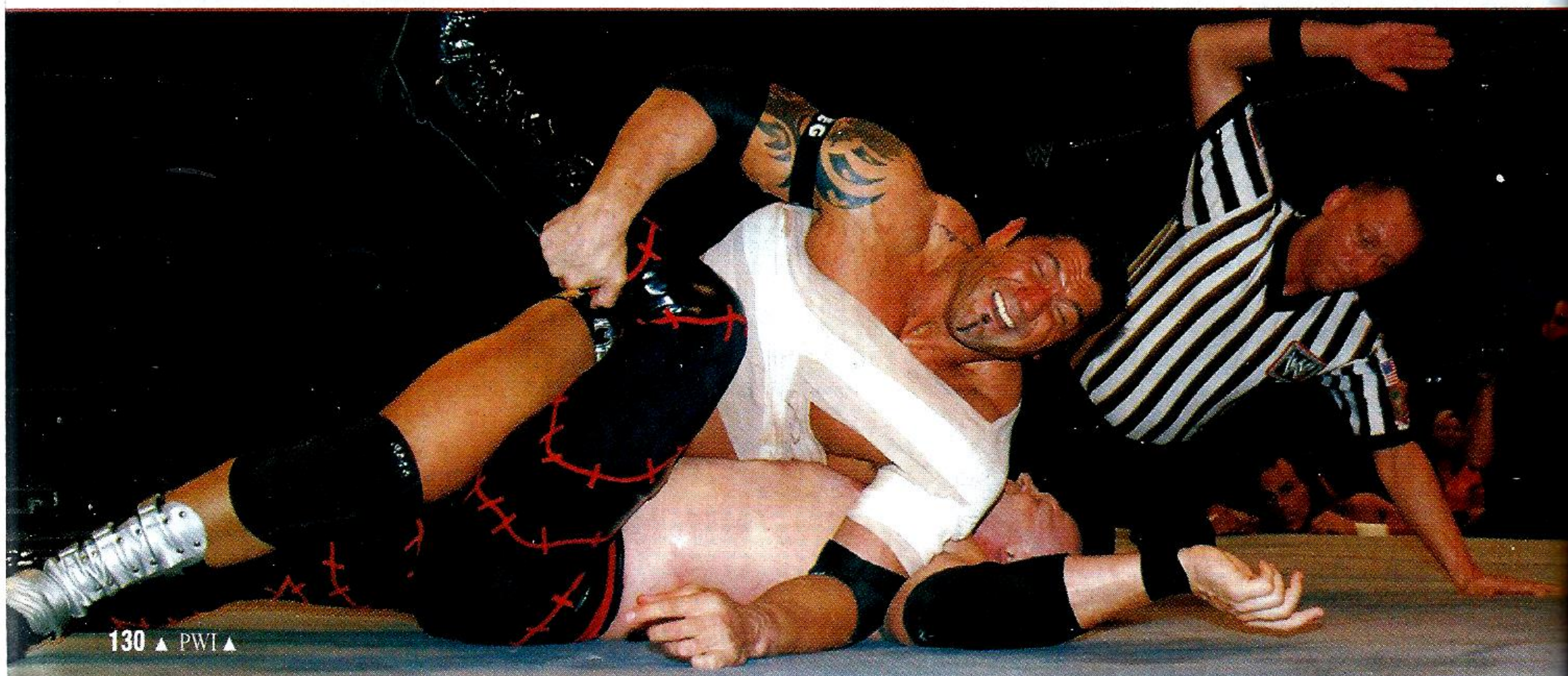
GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: The only thing that stood in the way of Batista's dreams for 2006 was his own perfect physique. In late-2005, Batista suffered a torn muscle in his back, and doctors recommended he take some time off from the ring to let the tear heal. Batista opted to soldier through the pain, feeling that the Smackdown brand needed him, plus he desperately wanted to defend the brand's World title at WrestleMania 22. But then Batista suffered a torn triceps, and he had no choice but to vacate the title and spend the next six months on the sidelines. Batista is so densely muscled that his body is actually *more* prone to injury than most wrestlers with lesser physiques. When muscles that size expand and contract, the risk of tearing—or pulling away from the bone—increases. That's a lesson the first half of this year has taught "The Animal." Reportedly, Batista was less-than-thrilled to be sent from Raw to Smackdown. Due to the draft lottery and the injuries, Batista has moved from being Raw's top star to being a question mark on Smackdown. **GRADE: C**

MARKETABILITY: Injuries or no injuries, Batista is still insanely popular with the fans. His absence from the ring may actually have helped him in that regard, as some people felt Batista was beginning to stagnate on Smackdown with disappointing feuds against JBL and Mark Henry. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, and, right now, Smackdown fans are hungry to see a dominant fan favorite world champion once again. **GRADE: A**

REPERTOIRE: Before his injury, Batista's repertoire was quite limited as he relied almost exclusively on power moves like the spinebuster and power bomb. But after five months of not being able to train due to the injury, Batista has lost a little bit of his muscle mass. Hopefully, he has been able to work on his cardiovascular conditioning and maybe learned a few new submission holds or finesse moves to add to his game. A triangle choke or leglock would put substantially less stress on the lower back than relying on the Batista bomb night after night. But, until we see whether new moves creep into his arsenal, we have to give him the same grade we gave him last year. **GRADE: C**

CAREER GROWTH: It's not his fault, but the injuries have stymied Batista's momentum. It doesn't help that Batista got started in wrestling relatively late in life at the age of 28 (he's now 37). Batista is driven to succeed and to regain the Smackdown World title because he wants to make up for that lost time. **GRADE: B-**

OVERALL VALUE: At the start of 2006, Batista was unquestionably WWE's top star, especially since John Cena was facing such a backlash from the fans. But now that Rob Van Dam has finally won a world title, and, with Triple-H becoming a fan favorite as part of DX, Batista has some competition as the WWE's most popular star. He's still close to the top, but he's no longer irreplaceable. **GRADE: B-**



BATISTA



RHINO

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: For two days in October 2005, Rhino was the king of TNA. Going from the NWA World title to feuding with Bobby Roode isn't exactly the career path we would have charted for the former ECW World champion. On the upside, Rhino rebounded from being released from WWE by winning championship gold in TNA. On the downside, he has struggled against the likes of Abyss and Team Canada ever since. He didn't even qualify for the "King Of The Mountain" title match at Slammiversary. After debuting in TNA with a full head of steam, Rhino has lost all momentum. **GRADE: B-**

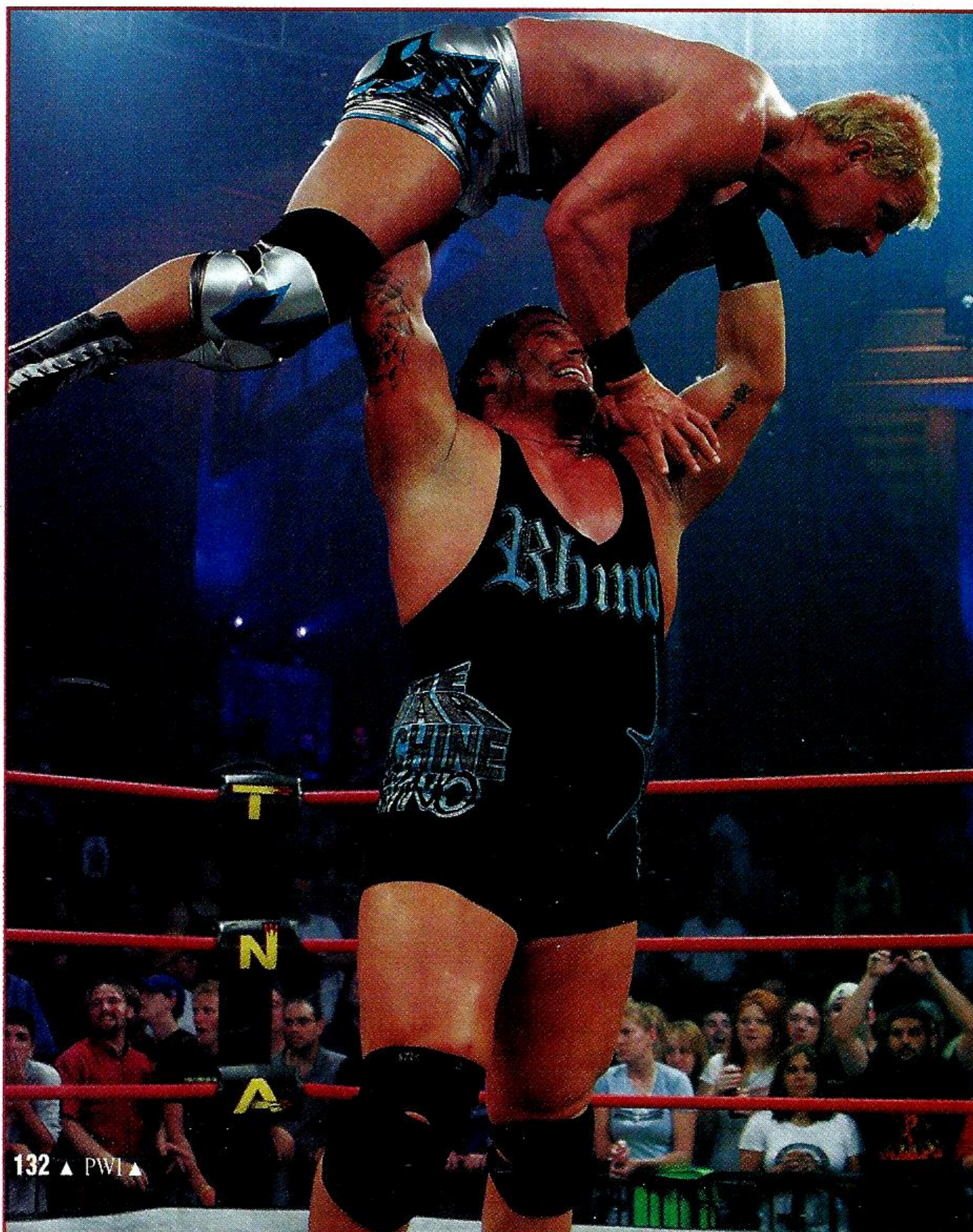
MARKETABILITY: Ever see a rhino at the zoo? They don't do all that much. They kind of stand around and graze, maybe go for a dip in a swimming hole. No one goes to the zoo specifically to see the rhinos. They

want to see the monkeys or lions or some of the other flashier animals. Of course, you're impressed if you have the opportunity to see a rhino charge, but they're not what you'd call marketable animals. And Rhino isn't the most marketable wrestler. **GRADE: C**

REPERTOIRE: Rhino makes no apologies for being a straightforward brawler. He weakens opponents with heavy right hands, shoulder blocks, and clotheslines before going for the kill with the big "Gore." And once he hits that, the match is over. We can't argue with his approach. We can nitpick, but he does well with what he's got. **GRADE: B**

CAREER GROWTH: There was some speculation that Rhino would leave TNA to be part of the relaunched ECW project in WWE, but he opted to stay in Orlando. Time will tell if that loyalty was a good career move or a decision he will come to regret. But now the onus is on Rhino to get back to his winning ways and remind people how he earned the nickname of "The War Machine." **GRADE: B-**

OVERALL VALUE: When Rhino first showed up in TNA, he was a major acquisition. He was a former WWE competitor who had a strong fan base from his days in ECW. When he beat Jarrett to win the NWA World title, it looked like he was ushering in a new era for the company. As it turned out, Rhino's reign was merely a hiccup in Jarrett's title run and not a new day dawning for the company. Since then, Rhino has had to take a back seat to newer TNA acquisitions such as Christian Cage and Sting. Having Rhino around adds credibility to the NWA World title and helps fill out the card, plus he can always regroup and make another rush at the championship. He is an important upper mid-card competitor and a spoiler for anyone who wants to contend for the NWA World title. **GRADE: B-**



RHINO



CHRIS SABIN

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Chris Sabin did a fantastic job captaining Team USA to victory in the World X Cup tournament. In a perfect world, his yeoman's job in keeping Alex Shelley, Sonjay Dutt, and Jay Lethal on the same page long enough to triumph over international competition should earn him an immediate shot at the X division title. Instead, Sabin found himself as the division's first line of defense against the invading Kevin Nash. Sabin may have earned a moral victory against Nash at Slammiversary, but Nash still got his arm raised in the end. If Sabin doesn't bounce back quickly and beat Nash cleanly, he's going to prove all of Nash's rhetoric about a mediocre big man being able to beat anyone in the X division. If he fails to beat Nash, Sabin will pretty much have to get used to being a career mid-card competitor in TNA. **GRADE: B**

MARKETABILITY: Last year, we said that Sabin "lacks the personality to stand out from everyone else" in the X division and that "he needs to develop a gimmick or at least a catchphrase to become marketable." Sabin apparently read our report card. He went out and got himself a new set of trunks with a weird alien head on them. *Umm*, Chris, you're going to have to do more. Being the captain of Team USA was a step in the right direction, but now that the World X Cup tourney is over, it's time to update the image. **GRADE: C-**

REPERTOIRE: Sabin earned an A in this category last year, but we've raised the bar a little bit. Sure, Sabin is a fast and fluid chain wrestler. Sure, his uranage backbreaker is impressive and his reflexes are unparalleled. Against X division competition, Sabin is right there with Christopher Daniels and A.J. Styles as the best the division has to offer. But Sabin is just too small to use many of his best moves against larger competitors. He can't outmuscle Nash or Samoa Joe, and his current repertoire hasn't helped him against those big men. He needs some new attacks off the ropes or leg attacks that can better utilize his quickness and mitigate the size differential. **GRADE: B+**

CAREER GROWTH: Sabin is at a crossroads in his career. Does he want to be like former Team USA captain Jerry Lynn and be remembered as a great X division talent who didn't make much of an impact outside that division? Or does he want to be like Daniels, Styles, and Samoa Joe and use that division to springboard to bigger and better things. He won the World X Cup. It's time to break away from the X division for a while before he gets pigeonholed. **GRADE: B-**

OVERALL VALUE: Sabin is an important part of the X division, but with all of the incredible talent in that division, he's far from irreplaceable. He needs to find a way to capitalize on the attention he's received during the first half of 2006. **GRADE: B-**



CHRIS
SABIN



ABYSS

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Last year, we noted that Abyss had developed into perhaps the most feared competitor in TNA. We noted that he had yet to win the NWA World title after numerous attempts, but we gave him credit for remaining a vital part of the championship picture, saying, "Not every wrestler's main goal is to win a major championship. Abyss has succeeded in becoming a world-class competitor. The title should follow eventually."

A year has passed, and Abyss is exactly where he was one year ago—a persistent title contender, but still battling a big goose egg when it comes to the NWA World title. Now that he has James Mitchell as a manager to give him guidance and to keep him focused, we're finding it harder and harder to give Abyss the benefit of the

doubt. Christian Cage took all Abyss could dish out on two occasions and still managed to beat "The Monster". When it comes to the NWA World title, Abyss' window of opportunity is closing quickly. **GRADE: B-**

MARKETABILITY: Abyss has a certain undeniable charisma. He's big, he's mean, and whenever he wrestles, there's a good chance someone (frequently Abyss himself) is going to get dropped on a stack of thumbtacks or gored through a studio wall. Abyss is exciting, and excitement is marketable. Potentially, Abyss could be one of TNA's most marketable wrestlers. But while Mitchell may help Abyss in the ring, he doesn't help in the marketability department. The former "Sinister Minister" is just too creepy for the fans to ever warm up to. But if Abyss were to dump his manager and play to the crowd just a little, Abyss T-shirts and replica masks could be a goldmine. **GRADE: B**

REPERTOIRE: Abyss will never be confused with a Christopher Daniels or an A.J. Styles in terms of depth of moveset. But what Abyss does, he does well. His "Black Hole Slam" is vicious, and his sit-out backbreaker is downright frightening. We're not going to suggest Abyss spend too much time trying to work on new takedowns or wristlock variations, but it might be a good idea to change things up just a little bit. He tends to telegraph his big moves, making it easier for opponents who have properly scouted him to avoid his finishers. He might want to try changing things up by adding in a STO or leg sweep instead of a choke slam or "Black Hole Slam," just to keep opponents off-balance. His limited moveset is beginning to cost him matches. **GRADE: C+**

CAREER GROWTH: Adding Mitchell was a short-term fix, but Abyss has grown stagnant. Maybe he should find a tag team partner, or give the X-division a shot. He needs something to break him out of his comfort zone. **GRADE: C**

OVERALL VALUE: The big man is a reliable power merchant who can give you a good match regardless of whether he's facing Rhino, A.J. Styles, or Christian Cage. He is still a consistent title threat and could easily win the NWA World title by the end of 2006. But, right now, much of his potential is still going untapped. **GRADE: C+**



ABYSS



MATT HARDY

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Matt Hardy stormed back on *Raw* last year, instigating one of wrestling's top feuds of 2005 against Edge. Since then—well, to put it kindly—that house of fire poofed out in a cloud of harmless smoke. Edge got the last laugh in that feud, beating Hardy in a “Loser-Leaves-*Raw*” ladder match in October. Since then, Hardy hasn't done much of anything on *Smackdown*. He had a forgettable feud with Road Warrior Animal and has since been pretty much banished to *Velocity*, battling the likes of Simon Dean and Sylvan. **GRADE: C-**

MARKETABILITY: Even after all of the drama, Hardy is still enormously popular. He has a natural appeal and enthusiasm. He could get squashed week

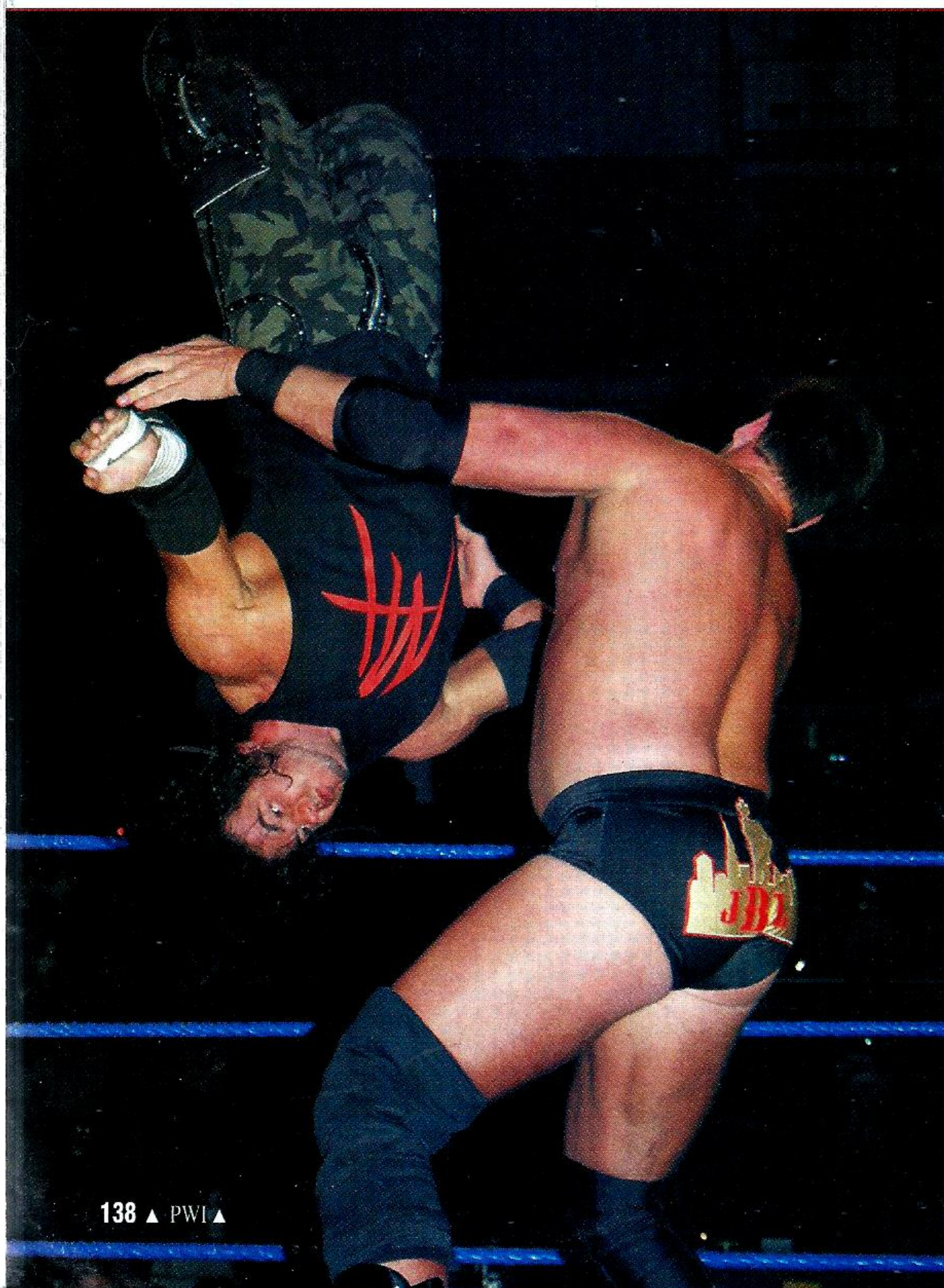
after week on *Smackdown* and still get one of the loudest pops of the night. Maybe it's his good looks. Maybe it's because people like underdogs. Or maybe he's still a sympathetic figure after Lita left him for Edge. Whatever he is, he's still a crowd favorite. But he really should change his catchphrase. “I will not die” is not only technically inaccurate, but it doesn't exactly inspire greatness.

GRADE: B+

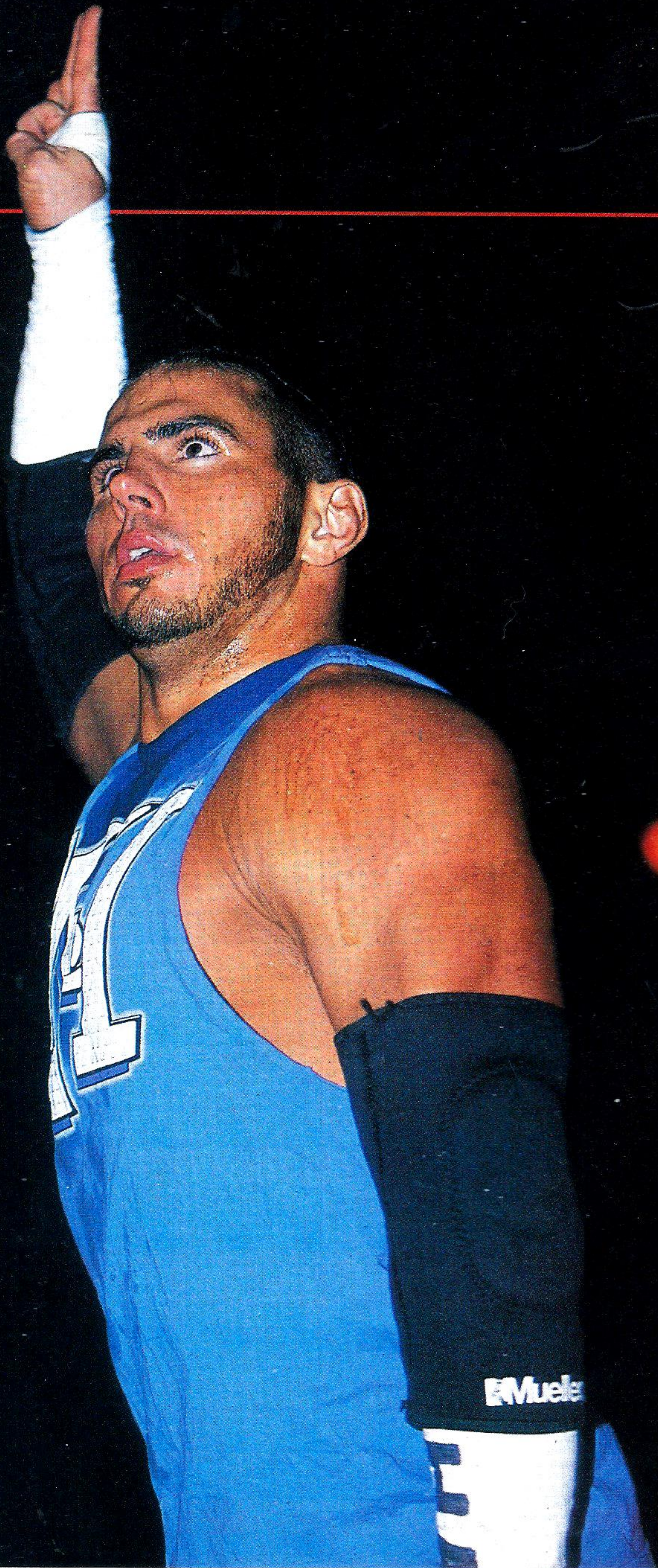
REPERTOIRE: For a relatively small man, Hardy utilizes an awful lot of power moves. That has hurt him against larger opponents who aren't as easy to lift into position for his crucifix power bomb or side slams. He also has a hot temper and can be easily goaded into fist-fights, which isn't his forte. Hardy is at his best when he's sticking with his hit-and-run offense, hitting dropkicks and legdrops before moving in for the kill with the “Twist Of Fate.” He has the tools, but abandons his game plan far too quickly. **GRADE: B-**

CAREER GROWTH: If you compare where Matt is today with where he was in April 2005, he's in a much better place now. After all, he was released from WWE and made occasional guest appearances on the indy circuit. But, if you compare where he was in July 2005 to where he is today, it's a huge step backward. He went from a featured role on *Raw* to struggling for airtime on *Smackdown*—and that's with *Smackdown* being largely depleted of fan favorites. He may want to seriously consider taking the Christian route and jumping to TNA when his contract runs out. **GRADE: D**

OVERALL VALUE: This is another case of potential vs. reality. Potentially, Hardy can be a major player on *Smackdown*. He could challenge Rey Mysterio Jr. for the *Smackdown* World title in what would be a compelling bout and possible Match of the Year. He could reunite with Shannon Moore and bring back his old “Mattitude.” He has a sizeable and vocal fan-base that supports him even when he's in preliminary or dark matches. But right now, he's not even a blip on the *Smackdown* radar. **GRADE: C+**



MATT
HARDY



Muele

RON KILLINGS

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Forget about report cards, someone needs to get Ron Killings to see the guidance counselor. For the life of us, we can't understand what Killings is trying to achieve. Does he want to regain the NWA World title for a third time? Does he want to win the X division title or the tag team title? Does he want to use TNA as a steppingstone to a recording deal? Killings is bouncing all over TNA. He's part of Sting's army, he's teaming with Rhino, he's facing X division guys, he's rapping and dancing—he's all over the place. Unless he gets some sort of focus, Killings isn't going to accomplish *anything*. **GRADE: D**

MARKETABILITY: TNA hasn't really gotten behind "The Truth" since his first run as NWA World champion back in 2002. We don't know why. Killings is one of the sport's most underrated talkers as he consistently cuts funny, entertaining promos. His offense is dynamic, and he gets a huge pop from the crowd when

he comes to the ring. His audience is there, but TNA's marketing team isn't doing enough to reach that audience. That's not Killings' fault. **GRADE: B**

REPERTOIRE: Again, Killings' offense is extremely underrated. We dare you to find someone else who can consistently execute perfect kneeling musclebusters, 450-splashes, awesome scissors kicks and huracan-ranas *and* break dance between big moves. Killings not only has the flash, but he has the substance to back it up. He rarely gets cut off doing a dance routine. His offense just sort of flows, with an occasional split or backspin thrown in for good measure. He's more dangerous than most people realize. **GRADE: B**

CAREER GROWTH: It's not that Killings has fallen out of the NWA World title picture. He's still right in the thick of things, but so are another half-dozen people. You look at Jeff Jarrett and see a guy consumed by a

desire to wear the strap. You see that same obsession in Abyss, Christian Cage, and Raven, too. But you don't see it in Killings. A couple of years ago he was right on the cusp of the title and then inexplicably started goofing around with 3 Live Kru and dropped right out of the top 10 rankings. He's challenging for the title now, but we don't see any growth—just more and more inconsistency. "What's Up," indeed. **GRADE: C**

OVERALL VALUE: Killings is the proverbial Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. When motivated, he's one of the most exciting and popular wrestlers on the TNA roster. He has crossover appeal and star power. But if he's only going to turn on the effort every once in a while, he's really not all that valuable to TNA at all. **GRADE: C+**



RON
KILLINGS



JOHN BRADSHAW LAYFIELD

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: John Bradshaw Layfield's 2004 victory over Eddie Guerrero for the WWE title was considered a colossal upset, but JBL turned out to be a more enduring champion than anyone could have imagined. But, once JBL was relieved of that gold by John Cena, the self-proclaimed "Wrestling God" fell into a slump. Losses to Cena, Batista, and even The Boogeyman followed. The only real bright spot JBL had over the past year was his U.S. title win over Chris Benoit at WrestleMania 22. Now, because he put his foot in his mouth and said he would stop wrestling on *Smackdown* if he lost to Rey Mysterio, JBL's future is a big question mark. This certainly couldn't have been how he planned for 2006 to go. **GRADE: C-**

MARKETABILITY: JBL may have been despised by most fans, but he was actually a pretty darn good ambassador for WWE as far as the mainstream press goes (his goose-stepping scandal of 2004 notwithstanding). Layfield is a savvy financial analyst with his own nationally syndicated radio talk show. He does a lot to break the stereotype of all pro wrestlers being grunting, monosyllabic Neanderthals. If only he can do something about his xenophobic political views. **GRADE: B-**

REPERTOIRE: JBL often compared his athletic prowess to that of a drunken hippopotamus. We don't think he was quite *that* bad, but he certainly wasn't what you'd call a master technician. Layfield is a tenacious

brawler with a decapitating clothesline. But, without punches and kicks, JBL doesn't have much of an arsenal at all. **GRADE: C-**

CAREER GROWTH: JBL was on top of the world in early-2005. Now he's a color commentator. That's obviously a step down, but it may not be as big of a step down as one might think. If Layfield has designs of getting back into the ring at some point, there's no better place for him to rest up some nagging injuries, scout prospective future opponents, and pick plenty of fights from the relative safety of the announcers' table. If he does get back in the ring, he will be a more dangerous wrestler than he was before his forced retirement. **GRADE: B-**

OVERALL VALUE: Let's examine JBL first as a wrestler and then as a color commentator. As a wrestler, he was a viable *Smackdown* main-eventer. He may have drawn more heat than anyone else in the history of that brand. He also proved to be surprisingly entertaining at times, such as in his beer drinking contest with Steve Austin or when he pretended to be drugged and challenged an inflatable Godzilla to a fight in Japan. As a wrestler, he was a versatile and capable performer. A good color commentator can add insight and analysis to improve a TV show. Thus far, JBL has simply insulted people he doesn't like and put himself over whenever possible. He's a valuable wrestler but a lousy announcer. **GRADE: C+**



JOHN BRADSHAW
LAYFIELD



RANDY ORTON

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: In 2004, Randy Orton became the youngest man ever to win a WWE world title. He was supposed to be the future of WWE, the guy who would carry the ball for years to come. When he lost the belt to Triple-H, most people figured he would win the belt back at WrestleMania 21. It didn't happen. In fact, nearly two years later, Orton *still* hasn't regained that title. Orton only has himself to blame. He was suspended 60 days for disciplinary reasons following WrestleMania 22, and all of the stories present him as having an out-of-control ego. Orton needs to grow up fast or he'll always be known as the guy who had the world handed to him on a silver platter—and choked. **GRADE: D**

MARKETABILITY: In the summer of 2004, Orton was WWE's shining star. The fans loved him, and maybe he let some of that adoration go to his head. His marketability has certainly taken a hit as more and more stories of his backstage antics come out. He needs to take a page out of Edge's book and embrace his bad-boy image. He's obnoxious and condescending, and he makes a darn good villain. If he can come up with a new nickname to replace "The Legend Killer," he can climb right back up to the top of the WWE marketability pile. **GRADE: B-**

REPERTOIRE: For the past couple of years, Orton has been able to cover for his lack of scientific skills with his ability to slow down the pace of a match by relying on

chinlocks, side headlocks, and his sudden delivery of the "RKO." But Kurt Angle thoroughly exposed Orton at One Night Stand II. Angle employed a ground-based, shoot-fighting style, and Orton was completely out of his element. When Angle shot for Orton's legs, Orton didn't know enough to sprawl. When Angle cinched in a waistlock, Orton froze like a deer in the headlights and ended up eating a series of German suplexes. A third-generation wrestler should have better mat wrestling skills.

GRADE: C

CAREER GROWTH: Orton looks like he's finally emerging from his slump. A series of losses to The Undertaker and a shoulder injury slowed him down, but his jump to Raw—and his forays in ECW—have reinvigorated him. It's about time. He's finally getting back to where he should be. **GRADE: B**

OVERALL VALUE: Orton earned an A for overall value last year, mostly because he's still very young and he has the potential to be a top star for another decade or so. But Orton is a little less valuable this year. He was gone for 60 days, and no one really missed him. John Cena and Rob Van Dam have established themselves as credible main-eventers, and Bobby Lashley, Shelton Benjamin, and Carlito aren't that far off. Mix in Kurt Angle, Triple-H, Shawn Michaels, and The Undertaker, and Orton just isn't as vital as he seemed a year ago.

GRADE: C+



RANDY
ORTON



MICK FOLEY

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: We can't quite get a grasp on what Mick Foley is trying to achieve these days. He allowed Edge to goad him into a WrestleMania match after Edge pointed out that Foley had never had the magical WrestleMania moment he so badly coveted. Foley got his moment, getting speared and seared through a burning table. But then Foley got chummy with Edge and stood in opposition of ECW. He and Edge beat Tommy Dreamer and Terry Funk in a memorable match at One Night Stand II, and then Foley went on to challenge Flair. It's like Foley is trying to tie up all these loose ends that have dogged him during his retirement. But losing to Edge, beating Funk, losing fans, and promising to "stink up the joint" against Flair in a best-of-three falls match at Vengeance ... are these really viable goals? Foley's efforts could be much better focused in other directions. **GRADE: C**

MARKETABILITY: Foley alienated his fans with his anti-ECW rhetoric, but things aren't necessarily black and white. Foley hates ECW, and so does John Cena; does that make Foley a good guy? But Foley also pals around with Edge, so does that make him a bad guy? But the basis for Foley's feud with Flair is that Flair took the first shot by calling Foley a "glorified stunt man" and a lousy wrestler in Flair's autobiography, so defending himself from an unprovoked insult makes him a good guy ... doesn't it? We have no idea. Foley can still cut a promo that makes fans want to see him fight, but no one's sure if they should be cheering him or booing him. **GRADE: C**

REPERTOIRE: Foley used to joke that he achieved his greatest success when he was in the worst shape of his career. Five years of semi-retirement, and years and years of hardcore abuse to his body have taken a very real toll. Foley can still fight, and his ability to absorb punishment is unsurpassed, but his stamina is awful and his wrestling skills have eroded. There was a time when Foley had a nice assortment of suplexes, as well as moves off the second rope, and suicide dives to the floor. These days, it seems like all he can do is fistfight for 10 minutes or so before he runs out of gas. **GRADE: C**

CAREER GROWTH: When Foley announced his retirement, he made a point to say that he wanted to go out at the top of his game. We like Foley, and it truly pains us to say this, but this comeback has been a big mistake. While he's had some great promos and some solid matches, Foley is nowhere near the top of his game anymore. **GRADE: C-**

OVERALL VALUE: Despite all those Cs, Foley is still valuable to WWE. He can inspire heartfelt cheers or boos and can cut a promo that leaves you hanging on every word. And having a best-selling author on the roster is good always good for business. Unfortunately, so many negatives cancel out these few pluses. **GRADE: C**



MICK
FOLEY



JEFF JARRETT

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: If not for Jim Cornette, Jeff Jarrett would have started his sixth reign as NWA World champion at Slammiversary. Instead, he had to wait another two weeks before being declared champion. Prior to that, he had been without the NWA World title since Against All Odds, where he dropped the belt to Christian Cage. He has still been the focal point of the company due to his high-profile feud with Sting, but this year saw the longest amount of time he has gone without the NWA World title since TNA started in 2002.

GRADE: C

MARKETABILITY: TNA presents itself as cutting-edge and revolutionary. Jarrett is straight out of Memphis, circa 1983. Don't believe us? Anyone else catch the similarities between his "King Of The Mountain" qualifying match against Raven and the infamous Tupelo Concession Stand Brawl of 1979? Don't worry—neither

did 95 percent of the fans in the Impact Zone. Jarrett is a competent wrestler, but his entire persona is the antithesis of what TNA is supposed to be all about. Ever wonder why you never see people walking around in Jarrett T-shirts? It's not because they're sold out. **GRADE: D**

REPERTOIRE: Being branded an "old school wrestler" isn't necessarily a bad thing. Jarrett has wrestled almost all of the top names in the sport through the years, and he's had success everywhere he's wrestled. Jarrett can flat-out wrestle, and his "Stroke" remains one of the most effective finishers in TNA. But Jarrett has grown lazy in TNA. Whenever he's challenged, he goes right for that guitar. If that doesn't work, he has a never-ending stream of wrestlers ready to interfere on his behalf. The repertoire is there, but Jarrett rarely scratches the surface before he resorts to blatant cheating.

GRADE: B-

CAREER GROWTH: It's hard to grow when you're already full-grown. Jarrett has been at—or near—the top of TNA since the company opened in 2002. He hasn't had much growth in the past year, but he has already established himself as a top contender to the NWA World title. He's always just one match away from the belt ... and that's one match he'll always get.

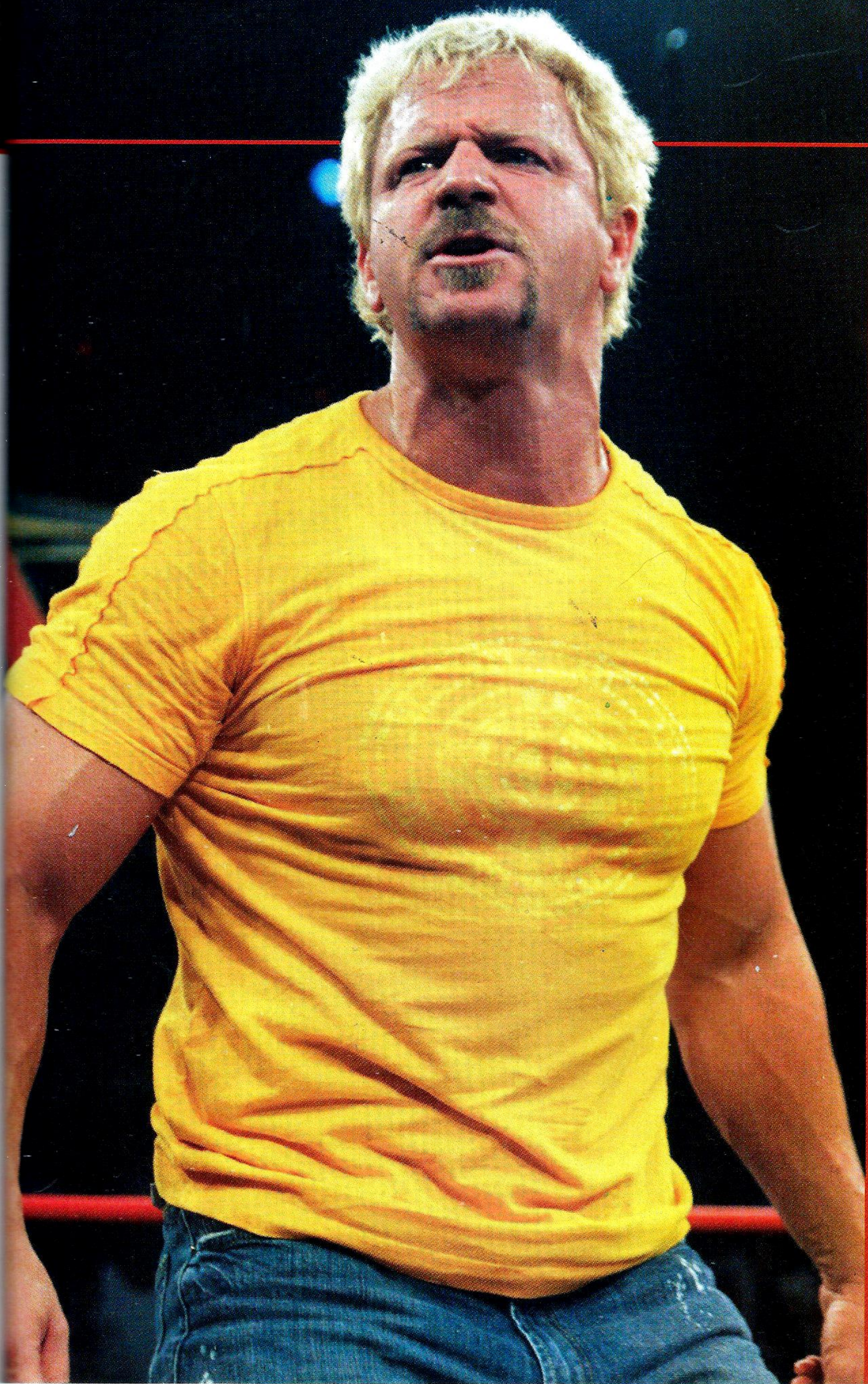
GRADE: C+

OVERALL VALUE: In a lot of ways, Jarrett is the glue that holds TNA together. In the ring, he's the company's top heel and its most prolific world champion. Even when the belt isn't around his waist, Jarrett still manages to be a part of the company's top storyline. Behind the scenes, Jarrett is a tireless advocate for TNA and has been absolutely vital to the company's survival, including brokering the deal between TNA and majority owner Panda Energy. But—like Triple-H—Jarrett's monopoly of the NWA World title has also resulted in fan resentment. For every way he helps TNA, he seems to hurt TNA just as much.

GRADE: C



JEFF
JARRETT



THE GREAT KHALI

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Khali is the most impressive newcomer to WWE in years. He has been kicking around Japan for a couple of years now as a novelty act where he was a draw based purely on his freakish size. He had a small but memorable part on the re-make of *The Longest Yard*, but for a 7-foot man, he has kept a relatively low profile. Now he's the resident juggernaut of the Smackdown brand and has collected one-sided wins over The Undertaker and Rey Mysterio Jr. He hasn't really been tested yet, and we have a feeling The Undertaker will be back to put him to the test soon enough, but wins over a world champions give him the credibility he previously lacked as a human oddity.

GRADE: A

MARKETABILITY:

The Great Khali is one fire! All the kids today are walking around saying his catchphrase, "Argho, ooh, grblml!" Just kidding. The Great Khali's never going to sell much merchandise, but his return match with The Undertaker (and possibly matches against John Cena) could draw big audiences who are curious to see how anyone can beat such a massive individual. Once Khali suffers his first defeat, however, his marketing appeal will be gone. **GRADE: C**

REPERTOIRE: Chop to the head, stomp to the chest, chokeslam. Congratulations. You've now seen a Great Khali match.

GRADE: F

CAREER GROWTH: The saying is "the bigger they are, the harder they fall." The Great Khali is pretty darn big right now—not only in terms of physical size, but also in profile. His first target was The Undertaker, and you don't find many more difficult opponents than "The Dead Man." Incredibly, Khali has had some success

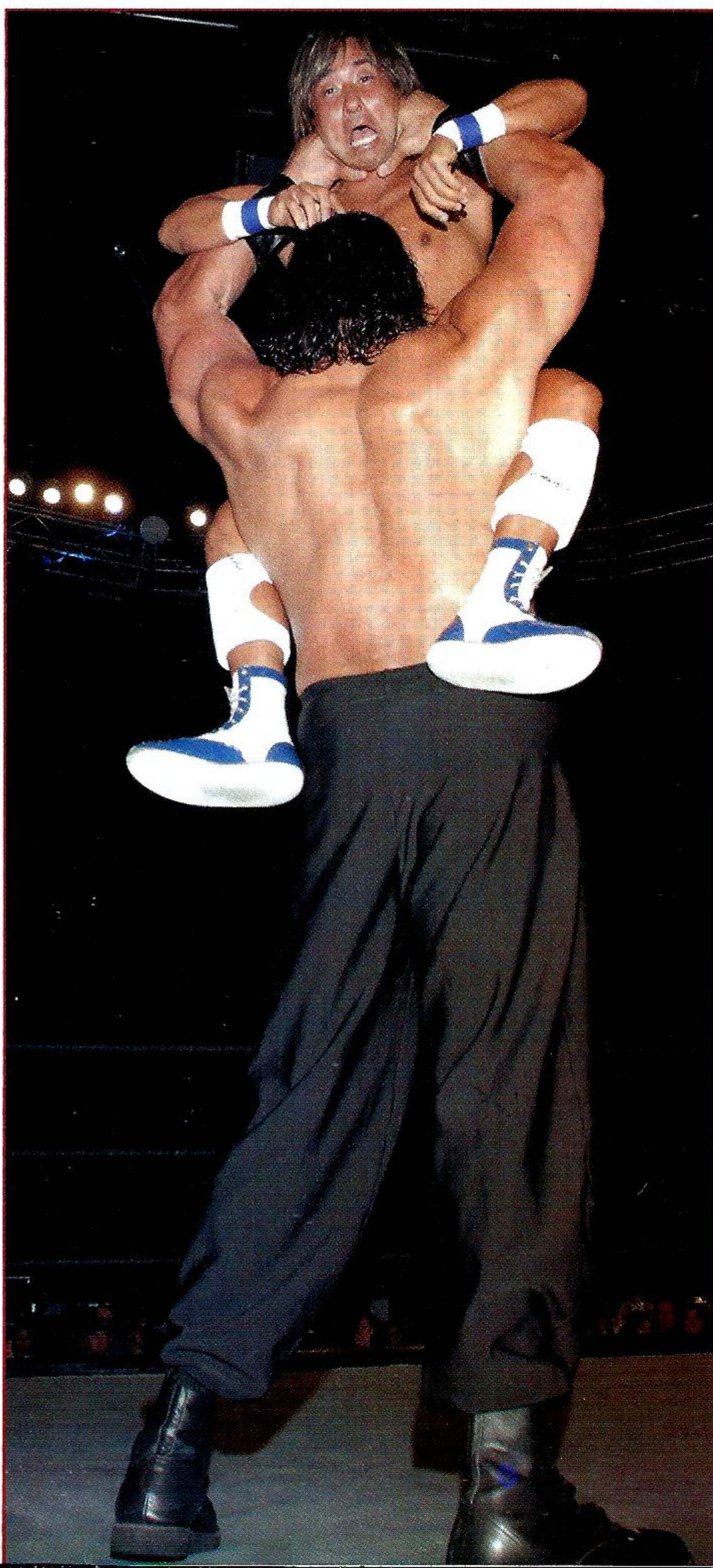
against 'Taker, and he even pinned Misterio in a non-title match. He's on top of Smackdown ... and that means the only place he can go next is down. And when he goes down, he's going to go down hard. We give him credit for making such a big impact so quickly, but he loses points for selecting a career path that gives him very little room to grow from here.

GRADE: C+

OVERALL VALUE:

Wrestling purists may decree giants like Khali as untalented slugs who only made it in the wrestling game because of their physical size. A lot of those same fans complain that Khali is such a focal point of *Smackdown* while the infinitely more talented Kid Kash and Jamie Noble can't even get face time on TV. All that may be true, but let's face facts—those giants draw far more attention from casual fans, and higher PPV buy-rates, than normal-sized guys. Size *does* matter, and 7'1", 410-pound monsters don't grow on trees.

GRADE: C



THE GREAT
KHALI



MONTY BROWN

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: It still just doesn't make any sense. Why in the world did Monty Brown turn rule-breaker and join up with Jeff Jarrett, right as it appeared he was about to beat Jarrett for the NWA World title? That happened at Destination X nearly a year-and-a-half ago, and it still leaves us scratching our heads. "The Alpha Male" has been stuck in a rut ever since. Brown sold himself out, and then dropped behind Christian Cage, Sting, Samoa Joe, and a host of others in NWA World title contention. If this is all part of some master plan, it's about time for him to make something happen. Otherwise, his turn will rank as one of the biggest tactical errors in TNA's four-year history. **GRADE: D**

MARKETABILITY: Once upon a time, Brown was the most marketable commodity in TNA. A former

NFL linebacker with oodles of charisma and a dynamite look, Brown could have been TNA's first real home-grown breakout superstar. Instead, he has spent all this time spinning his wheels. How much of that potential has been wasted in the past 16 months? Will the fans buy Brown as a viable title contender after seeing him spend this much time piling up losses? Right now, Brown's marketability is pretty low, but the potential is still there. It may not be for much longer. **GRADE: B-**

REPERTOIRE: Turning against the fans gave Brown the chance to experiment with a more aggressive style. He certainly seems to enjoy it, but he needs to do more. If Brown ever developed some new offense—be it incorporating some new strong style strikes and kicks or developing some wear-down holds to set up "The

Pounce"—he would be a much more dangerous wrestler. Right now, he's still a slightly better than average brawler with a great finisher. He needs more if he wants to go to the next level.

GRADE: C+

CAREER GROWTH: Brown is the man who could have been king. He could have been TNA's Goldberg: a dynamic force embraced by the fans and courted by the mainstream media. But he's not. And unless he changes things around soon, he never will be. **GRADE: D**

OVERALL VALUE: "Potential"—it's the word that will haunt "The Alpha Male" until he finally wins a world title. Maybe that's unfair, but, like all good teachers, we have to hold those with the most potential up to a higher standard. On paper, Brown is one of TNA's most invaluable wrestlers. Certainly, WWE would love to sign him and put their media machine behind him. He's still enormously valuable ... even if he doesn't seem to realize it.

GRADE: C-



MONTY
BROWN



CHRIS MASTERS

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: The most impressive thing "The Masterpiece" has achieved since joining WWE is backing up his claim that his "Masterlock" is truly unbreakable. Chris Masters came up short in his bids to win the Intercontinental title and the Raw World tag team title with Carlito Caribbean Cool, but once he locks those fingers and cinches in his full-nelson, he's got the match won. He became a major player for Raw since getting his call-up from OVW, but he needs to show the world there's more to him than a fantastic physique. Masters has seemed lost since breaking with Carlito. He has to reset his goals and make a move. **GRADE: B-**

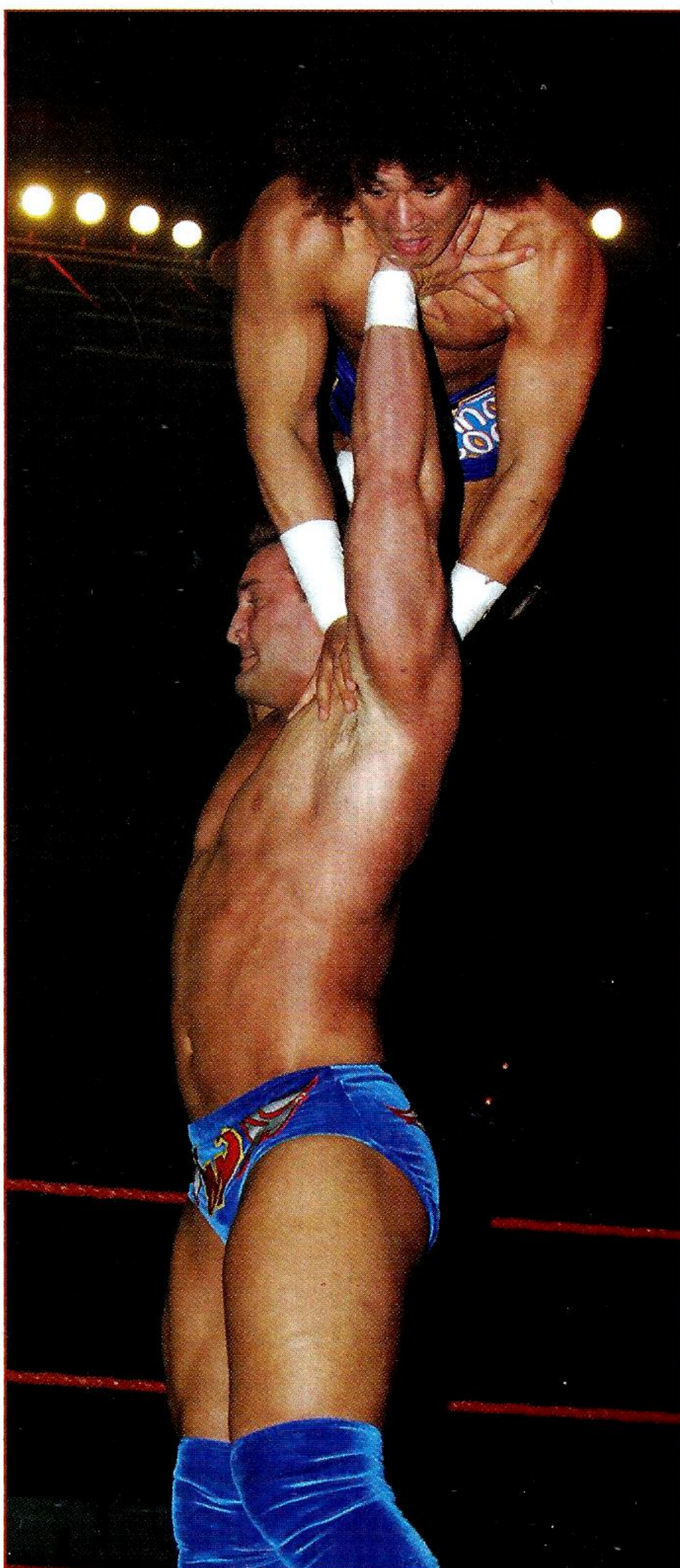
MARKETABILITY: Let's face it: "The Masterlock" isn't exactly the flashiest move out there. It doesn't send a wave of excitement through the crowd when Masters positions himself behind his opponent and looks to lock in his finisher. Plus, Masters isn't a particularly good interview, either. Other than his physique, he doesn't have much that makes him stand out from the pack. Unless he personally endorses a line of protein bars, he's doesn't move the marketability meter. **GRADE: D**

REPERTOIRE: Masters is two decades late for being a superstar. Back in the 1980s, wrestlers like Lex Luger, Rick

Rude, The Ultimate Warrior, Hercules Hernandez became top stars all because of their physiques. But today's fans demand more out of their main-eveners; you actually have to be able to *wrestle*, too. Masters deserves more respect than he gets from a lot of fans, but other than his "Masterlock," he doesn't have much to fall back on. If someone ever devises a counter to that move, Masters is toast. He needs more depth. **GRADE: D+**

CAREER GROWTH: We've got to think Vince McMahon—a big body-building buff—took a liking to Masters. Masters shot up the Raw ranks and frequently found himself in the main event. But Masters seems to have run out of gas now that McMahon has made The Spirit Squad his pet project. He could use a jump to Smackdown or an image makeover to regain his momentum. **GRADE: C+**

OVERALL VALUE: Masters is on thin ice in WWE. He is an underrated wrestler who reminds us of a young Paul Orndorff, but he needs to regain focus. He could certainly use a good manager to help steer him clear of trouble and keep his name in the discussion of potential title contenders. But without that, and without showing us anything beyond the "Masterlock" after a year-and-a-half, Masters is in danger of slipping into dark match territory. **GRADE: C-**



CHRIS
MASTERS



THE NATURALS

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: The good news is that Andy Douglas and Chase Stevens are both healthy and back to teaming. The bad news is that The Naturals are going through a miserable slump in TNA. While taking on Shane Douglas as a mentor/manager could potentially be a good thing, Douglas and Stevens can't enjoy having "The Franchise" browbeating them for "failing to use the gifts God gave them" or "forgetting the lessons Chris Candido taught them." The Naturals are three-time NWA World tag team champions. They don't need Douglas treating them like a charity case and demeaning them, slump or no slump. **GRADE: C-**

MARKETABILITY: The Naturals are still a vanilla tag team. While they are a decent team, they have, at this point, shown no charisma (though Douglas seems to elicit quite a few squeals from the ladies) or personality. Of course, the same thing was said about America's

Most Wanted not too long ago. Hopefully, some of Douglas' attitude and personality will rub off on them, like Candido's did early last year. Right now, they're not very marketable at all. **GRADE: D**

REPERTOIRE: Douglas and Stevens have impressed TNA fans with their quick double-team moves (such as "The Natural Disaster") and high-octane offense. Stevens in particular has a nice shooting star press and Ace crusher executed out of a Death Valley driver position. Those moves were good enough to score some big wins, especially early in their time together. But now that their opponents have had an opportunity to thoroughly scout them, Douglas and Stevens aren't getting many opportunities to connect with their money moves. They need to improve on basic wear-down moves. With his broad chest and ability to pop his hips quickly, Stevens may want to try a version of Douglas' old belly-to-belly suplex, for example. They need to find new moves they can execute to perfection to set up the old standards. **GRADE: C**

CAREER GROWTH: Maybe The Naturals won their first NWA World tag team title too soon. It took everyone by surprise at the time—including them. Douglas and Stevens instantly found themselves in the ring against great competition, and that brought out the best in them. Now that that initial success has passed, it's like they are over-thinking their situation and losing confidence. Their career isn't growing—it's diminishing. Hopefully, Douglas can change that. **GRADE: C-**

OVERALL VALUE: Ironically, The Naturals could probably walk on to Raw or Smackdown and win the tag title within a few months. But, in TNA, the overall roster may be smaller than in WWE, but the tag team division is much, *much* larger and more competitive. Unless they find their A-game, The Naturals aren't too valuable to TNA. But if they do get back to their old winning ways, they can be a major force in the competitive tag division. **GRADE: C-**



THE NATURALS



THE SPIRIT SQUAD

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: It's a Faustian bargain: You get WWE contracts, become a focal point of the Raw brand through the spring and summer, win the tag team title, and feud with Triple-H and Shawn Michaels. But you also have to lose every last bit of your dignity and become male cheerleaders. For Nick Nemeth, Mike Mondo, Ken Doane, Nick Mitchell, and Johnny Jeter, apparently it was too good a deal to pass up. The Spirit Squad may be obnoxious, but they're having tremendous success in WWE ... *as a group*. It seems like the only time they win a match is when they get an opportunity to gang up on their opponents and turn the match into a glorified handicap match. You have to give The Spirit Squad credit in that they got the call up from OVW to WWE and managed to win the tag team title from The Big Show and Kane. But we wonder what happens if the group fractures? Doane could be the breakout star, but will any of the guys be able to live down this annoying male cheerleader gimmick? The Spirit Squad could actually *ruin* all five men's careers if they're not careful. **GRADE: C+**

MARKETABILITY: People *despise* the Spirit Squad. That's kind of the effect they're going for, but it doesn't do them any favors in the marketability category. The fact that all five guys are pretty much interchangeable in their current roles doesn't help either. **GRADE: F**

REPERTOIRE: Anyone who has watched some OVW TV can tell you all five members of The Spirit Squad are genuinely good wrestlers. Kenny has been earning comparisons to a young Randy Orton for years. Johnny is a former OVW heavyweight champion. Mikey was the head trainer at the OVW training school. These guys really do know how to wrestle. But, as The Spirit Squad, all they're interested in doing is ganging up on Vince McMahon's enemies and beating them down. **GRADE: C+**

CAREER GROWTH: Again, the collective Spirit Squad has no complaints. A headlining feud against DX is the dream of every WWE developmental wrestler, which is exactly what these five guys were last year at this time. But they have to have an idea of where they're going to go from here. Wrestling history is littered with talented wrestlers who were never able to escape the yoke of a bad gimmick (poor Terry Taylor *still* has Red Rooster flashbacks). They should enjoy this run. Things may never be this good for them again. **GRADE: B-**

OVERALL VALUE: It's good to have rulebreakers who draw the amount of heat that The Spirit Squad does. When John Cena was hearing so many boos, WWE started to turn that around just by having him face the Squad. WWE could put Barry Bonds in the ring against The Spirit Squad and get the fans to give Bonds a standing ovation. Bad guys *that* hated are nice to have. **GRADE: C-**



THE SPIRIT SQUAD





HOTLINE

Hosted by Dan Murphy

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